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THE PATH *of* HONOR

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I WAS ASTONISHED TO SEE THAT HER FACE WAS SCARLET, AND
THAT SHE WAS STARING AT ME WITH STARTLED EYES

Page 42

THE PATH *of* HONOR

A Tale *of* the War in the Bocage

BY
BURTON E. STEVENSON

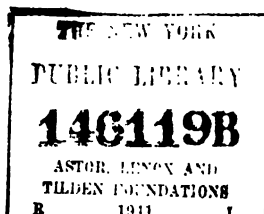
AUTHOR OF

"AT ODDS WITH THE REGENT," "CADETS OF GASCONY,"
"A SOLDIER OF VIRGINIA," ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
OLIVE RUSH
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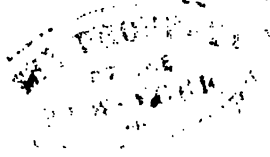


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“ For honour travels in a strait so narrow,
Where one but goes abreast: keep then the path.”

Troilus and Cressida

CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
I. THE TRAP OF SERGEANT DUBOSQ.....	11
II. IN AN ENEMY I FIND A FRIEND.....	23
III. I FALL INTO A PLEASANT BONDAGE.....	40
IV. A SCENT OF DANGER.....	53
V. I MAKE MY CONFESSION.....	69
VI. EVE IN THE GARDEN.....	80
VII. I DARE AND AM FORGIVEN.....	91
VIII. A SERPENT IN THE GARDEN.....	99
IX. PASDELOUP	109
X. BREAD UPON THE WATERS.....	119
XI. AT THE BELLE IMAGE.....	130
XII. MADNESS BECOMES FRENZY.....	141
XIII. THE UNFOLDING OF THE DRAMA.....	151
XIV. A BETTER MAN THAN I.....	163
XV. THE END OF GABRIELLE'S TOWER.....	168
XVI. THE TRAGEDY.....	174
XVII. I TAKE A VOW.....	184
XVIII. CIRCE'S TOILET.....	194
XIX. THE FIRST VENTURE.....	205
XX. A DAGGER OF ANOTHER SORT.....	218
XXI. FALSE PRETENSES.....	230
XXII. THE PONIARD AGAIN.....	242
XXIII. FORTUNE FROWNS.....	254
XXIV. THE DRAGON'S DEN.....	267
XXV. IN THE SHADOW.....	275
XXVI. "COURAGE"	287
XXVII. THE PATH OF HONOR.....	296
XXVIII. THE GUERDON.....	307

ILLUSTRATIONS

I was astonished to see that her face was scarlet, and that she was staring at me with startled eyes	PAGE
<i>Frontispiece</i>	
A sheet of livid flame leaped upward toward us, and the tower swayed.....	162
As I looked back I saw a mob of men clambering savagely over the rocks below.....	180
I strode to the door and flung it wide	266

ILLUSTRATIONS

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<i>Frontispiece</i>	
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As I looked back I saw a mob of men clambering savagely over the rocks below.....	180
I strode to the door and flung it wide	266

THE PATH *of* HONOR

CHAPTER I.

THE TRAP OF SERGEANT DUBOSQ.

DAWN was just breaking as I bade my fat little host at the Beau Visage good-by and, leaving the white streets of Tours behind me, crossed the shallow river and turned my face southward on the pleasant road to Poitiers.

The morning was a perfect one, soft and warm, with the shimmer of sunshine and the stirring of green things over the earth; for spring had come again to our fair land of Touraine, and I sat erect in the saddle, drinking long draughts of the good air, riotously, gloriously happy. For I was young, heart-whole, care-free, and setting forth upon a pilgrimage which would have given my father joy had he been alive to know. Yes, and it was the last morning of my life that I could apply to myself those three adjectives—though I did not suspect it then.

The way was thronged with market-women hastening toward the town, pushing their little carts before them, their sabots clacking merrily upon the hard, clean road, and their tongues clacking more merrily still. They looked up, with smiling countenances under their white caps, to

THE PATH OF HONOR

wish me good-morning and God-speed, and more than once I caught a flash of dark eyes in a fresh and rosy face which sent through me a pang of regret that I could not linger.

The broad valley of the river seemed one continued village, so closely were cottages and farmsteads set; but as I pushed forward into the flat country beyond, houses became less frequent, the road grew more and more deserted, and the fields stretched fallow and neglected to left and right as far as the eye could reach. Here and there, indeed, I caught a glimpse of a château veiled by a screen of trees, but the land itself seemed empty of humankind. There were no flocks in the pastures, no peasants in the fields, not a single plow driving a furrow through the waiting soil.

All of which, I told myself, was the bitter fruit of the Revolution. No one would sow when there was small likelihood of reaping; besides, the *canaille* found it more amusing to jostle about the streets of Paris, to shout for the Nation, and to watch the guillotine at work. Ever since that dusty battalion from Marseilles, with its red bonnets and furious faces, had marched up to Paris, singing its terrifying hymn, others, large and small, had followed, until it seemed that all France was crowding to the capital. When hunger gnawed there was always Citizen Santerre, offering refreshment to every one under certain easy conditions; there was work on the fortifications, or enlistment in the National Guard; and finally of



THE TRAP OF SERGEANT DUBOSQ

course, food might be stolen, if too difficult to earn. Or as a last resort information against one's neighbor might be laid before the Committee of Public Safety, and a reward secured.

I thanked God that we of Touraine had not yet been caught in the eddies of that maelstrom. Danton had been too busy at home to cast his eyes in our direction, and if our peasants ran away it was at least without leaving behind them blackened walls and outraged bodies. So we had lived our lives in peace, undisturbed by massacres, by the worship of Reason, or by that grim machine which toiled so ceaselessly upon the Place de la Révolution.

But as I topped a rise in the road, I saw that the instruments of war at least had at last invaded even this peaceful country. Under a tree by the roadside a group of soldiers were sitting, and it needed no second glance to tell me they were Republicans. They were lolling about, talking idly among themselves; only their officer was on his feet, but he was watching the road intently and the instant his eyes met mine he uttered a sharp command. In a breath his men had sprung to arms and deployed across the road.

I was a peaceful traveller, intent on my own business; so telling myself that I had nothing to fear from even the most rabid of Revolutionists, I continued on without hesitating. It could not be for such a small and inoffensive fish as I that a net so elaborate had been spread.

"Halt, citizen!" called the officer, as I came

THE PATH OF HONOR

up. "I must ask you to dismount," he added, looking at me with eyes of extraordinary brilliancy.

"Willingly," I replied, "if one of your men will hold my horse;" but two of them had him by the bridle before the words were fully uttered.

"Now, citizen," continued the officer, urbanely, as I sprang from the saddle and faced him, "there are a few questions which I shall have to ask you. But the sun is warm, and to stand is fatiguing, so let us sit down together in the shade of that tree yonder."

"Very well," I assented, and followed him to a spot where we were defended not only from the rays of sun but also from the curious ears of the soldiers of the detachment, which still held its position across the road.

My companion paused a moment to look at me before he began his questioning, and gave me in turn the opportunity to examine him. He was a tall, raw-boned man, evidently of enormous strength. His face was roughened by wind and rain and burned to a deep red by the sun. A ferocious mustache shaded mouth and chin, and his eyes gleamed behind their bushy brows like those of a beast in ambush. His hair was streaked with gray, but I judged not so much from age,—for his whole being was instinct with fire and vigor,—as from the appalling scenes in which he had played a part. He embodied for me at that moment the very spirit of the Revolution, irate, implacable, but with a certain rude sense of honor and of justice and a confused belief that its cause

THE TRAP OF SERGEANT DUBOSQ

was in some way bound up with human rights and human progress.

"Come, citizen," he began at last, "your name?"

"Jean Tavernay," I answered, deeming it wise to omit the preposition.

"Your home?"

"Near Beaufort."

"Your destination?"

"Poitiers."

"Your business?"

I hesitated.

"A private matter," I said finally.

He frowned fiercely.

"The Republic has the right to know!" he said, in a formidable voice.

"This is not a thing which in any way concerns the Republic. It concerns only myself."

"That is for me to judge. Besides, the business of the Republic is that of each of its citizens. Will you answer?"

I have,—I may as well confess at once what the reader must soon discover,—concealed under an exterior the most ordinary, a vein of obstinacy which has often impelled me to deeds the most foolish. It was so now. A hesitancy which had its origin in boyish shyness crystallized suddenly into sullen determination.

"Come," repeated my questioner even more fiercely, "will you answer?"

"No!" I said bluntly, and nerved myself for what might follow.

THE PATH OF HONOR

Then I began to suspect that this dragon, like that of Rouen, was ferocious only in appearance, for he contented himself with gnawing at his mustache and looking at me darkly.

"How am I to know you are not a *ci-devant*?" he rasped out at last. "A traitor, a conspirator against the Nation, a scoundrel upon whose head a price has been set?"

"Merely by looking at me, my friend," I retorted, and smiled at the thought that I, whose whole life had passed peacefully at Beaufort, could be any of those things.

I cannot say that he actually smiled in answer, but his face certainly relaxed.

"When did you leave Beaufort?" he questioned, in a milder tone.

"Yesterday morning."

"And last night?"

"I spent at Tours."

"What inn?"

"The Beau Visage."

"The landlord's name?"

"Triboulet."

"His appearance?"

"Short and fat, a red face, eyes like gimlets, and a head as bald as an egg."

My captor nodded.

"That's Triboulet," he said. "A fine fellow."

"Yes," I agreed; "and his wife——"

My captor smacked his lips.

"She made you an omelet?"

"The best I ever ate."

THE TRAP OF SERGEANT DUBOSQ

"She is famous for that," he said, and looked at me again, pulling pensively at his mustache.

"Come, citizen," he added, and this time he really smiled, "it is evident that you are not the game I am after."

"I should hope so," I agreed.

"I am looking for a wolf, not for a mouse."

"At least I am not a wolf," I conceded.

"Old Dubosq has seen too much of the world to be mistaken in a matter so clear as this," he continued, throwing out his chest. "A conspirator? Bah! You don't know its meaning. You're too pink and white—too much of the nursery—its odor clings to you! Why, infant, you've never before been away from your mother!"

I flushed, and he burst into a roar of laughter as he saw my face.

"A hit!" he cried. "Ah, citizen, would I could blush like that! But for Dubosq that day is past and far away. Come, my friend, all you need is a little knowledge of the world to be a perfect devil with the ladies. Join my troop and let Dubosq finish you, polish you, give you the true air. Come; it shall be my revenge."

"Your revenge?"

"Against the women. They have made me suffer and have laughed. A month ago I won my promotion, but a petticoat intervened, and the reward which should have been mine passed to another. Some day I will tell you——"

A shout from his men interrupted him.

We sprang to our feet and saw, just topping

THE PATH OF HONOR

the rise in the road, another rider. He drew short up at the shout and at sight of the guard barring his passage. Then he wheeled sharp around as though to retreat, but again stopped.

Dubosq chuckled.

"Caught!" he cried.

"But why doesn't he go back?" I asked.

"Because, my child, there's another detachment across the road down yonder, as you would have seen had you looked around." He drew a pistol from his belt and fired it in the air. "That will bring them on," he added. "Now, citizen, you will see the trap close—the trap of Sergeant Dubosq. Advance, men! Bring him down if he attempts to escape."

The Blues began to advance slowly, their guns presented.

"Hold your horse, citizen," said Dubosq, "and wait here for me. I have something more to say to you;" and he set off after his men.

The fugitive looked about him again. He was fairly caught between two fires. In a moment he must surrender, covered by twenty muskets. But he did not wait for that moment. Instead he put his horse at the ditch, leaped it, and made off across the fields.

"Fire!" yelled Dubosq. "Fire!"

A volley of shots rang out, echoed by another from up the road, and my heart rejoiced as I saw the fugitive keep on unharmed. But only for an instant. His horse bounded twice, then staggered and fell headlong.

THE TRAP OF SERGEANT DUBOSQ

The Blues gave a yell of triumph, leaped the ditch and started after their quarry, spreading fan-wise so that he could not escape. But he sprang from the saddle even as his horse fell, and ran with surprising speed toward a cluster of trees just ahead. In a moment he had disappeared among them.

I watched until his pursuers reached the grove and plunged into it; then I tied my horse to the tree and resumed my seat beneath its branches, for I was curious to see the end of this encounter. My sympathies were wholly with the fugitive. Whatever his offense, so gallant a dash for liberty deserved to be successful. And yet he could scarcely hope to escape with twenty men at his heels.

Once a chorus of frantic yells came to me from the grove, and I thought for a time that the chase was ended. But the moments passed, and I saw no sign of either the fugitive or his pursuers. Perhaps he had eluded them after all; or perhaps they were pushing across the country after him. In either event it was useless for me to tarry longer; it was time for me to be getting forward if I wished to reach Châtellerault, as I had planned, by nightfall. Only I should have liked to say good-by to Sergeant Dubosq. There was about the man a fascination, an air of deviltry, that pleased me. Perhaps at another time I might even have found myself listening to his words, but now——

“Sit still, monsieur,” said a low voice just

THE PATH OF HONOR

behind me; and I started round to find myself looking down the long barrel of a pistol above which gleamed two eyes, blue and cold as steel. "I was moved to shoot you," he went on evenly, "as the shortest way out; but after all I am not a murderer. I will give you one chance. I must have your horse. Give me your word of honor to sit there quietly, and you are safe; refuse,"—and he made a menacing little motion with his pistol.

There could be no doubting his earnestness. One glance at that resolute countenance convinced me that its owner would not hesitate to carry out his threat. But to lose my horse——

"Come," he said; "decide quickly. Faith, the choice ought not to be difficult;" and he laughed grimly.

"Take the horse, monsieur," I said, in a voice trembling with rage and chagrin. "But my hour will come!"

He laughed again, put up his pistol, and came out upon the road.

As I watched him untie my horse, I realized suddenly all that this loss would mean to me, and a blind impulse seized me to rush upon him and run him through. I think I must have yielded to it, in spite of my passed word, had he not seemed to trust it so implicitly. For he even turned his back to me as he bent to adjust the stirrups.

He seemed in no haste—indeed, I was apparently far more excited than he—and I had time to admire the erect figure, the easy carriage, the grace

THE TRAP OF SERGEANT DUBOSQ

of movement. Dubosq had spoken truly when he had pointed out that no one could mistake me for this finished cavalier. He sprang to the saddle with superb unconcern and paused for a look about him. He was even humming a song.

"Ah, there they come," he said, and following his eye, I saw Dubosq and his men burst from the grove and come charging across the field. "At last they have discovered how I eluded them! Blockheads! Adieu, monsieur."

"Till we meet again," I corrected.

He laughed blithely.

"As you will," he said, and gathered up the reins. "Whither are you bound?" he added, turning back to me.

"To Poitiers," I answered.

"Then we may indeed meet again;" and waving his hand to his enemies, who by this time were very near, he set spur to flank and galloped away down the road.

A shower of bullets followed him, but he kept on apparently unhurt, and in a moment more was out of gunshot.

Dubosq came panting up, his men at his heels. He was fairly livid. He stopped for an instant to shake his fist at the cloud of dust far down the road. Then he turned to me.

"Traitor!" he cried, hoarsely. "Aristocrat!" And I saw how the great veins stood out across his forehead. "So you had the effrontery to wait for me!"

THE PATH OF HONOR

"Assuredly," I replied, as calmly as I could, "since you requested it."

He glared at me for a moment with bloodshot eyes. Then he turned to his men.

"Secure him!" he said. "We will let him espouse Madame Guillotine."

And before I could open my lips to protest, my hands were lashed behind me.

CHAPTER II.

IN AN ENEMY I FIND A FRIEND.

FOR an instant I was too astonished to resist; then the indignity of it—the indignity of the strong and cruel hands which seized and held me—swept over me like flame, and I shook off my assailants and faced Dubosq.

“Loose me!” I cried, struggling furiously with my bonds. “Loose me! I demand that you loose me!”

Dubosq laughed sardonically.

“At your service,” he sneered. “Any other orders?”

I realized how impotent I was, and the knowledge struck chill to my heart. Dubosq could stand me up at the side of the road and order me shot, and no one would question or protest. He had only to give the word. I felt as the wild beast feels caught in a sudden trap.

“But this is an outrage!” I protested thickly, striving to still the trembling of my lips; for I was young—remember always, my reader, that I was young and new to the world,

Dubosq stood regarding me, gnawing his mustache savagely. I dare say the trembling lip did not escape him.

“Outrage or not,” he growled, “you are under arrest, citizen.”

THE PATH OF HONOR

"And for what?" I demanded.

"As an accomplice of the *ci-devant* Favras."

My astonishment was so overwhelming that even he discerned it.

"Of course you are innocent," he sneered.

"Citizen Dubosq," I said slowly, "I give you my word of honor that I have never before even heard of the person you mention. As for being his accomplice, that is too absurd to discuss."

"It is strange, then," commented Dubosq, grimly, "that you should have been so complaisant as to permit him to ride away upon your horse. But no doubt you have an explanation. There is always an explanation."

"Oh!" I cried, understanding suddenly and looking down the empty road. "So that was the *ci-devant* Favras! I am glad to know his name, for I have an account to settle with him. So far from permitting him to take the horse, I had an impulse to murder him."

"And why did you not?" Dubosq demanded. "That would at least have saved your own neck."

"I had given him my word," I explained, and related the dilemma in which I had found myself. "But even then," I concluded, "I would have killed him had he not turned his back."

Dubosq listened, looking at me keenly. At the last words he nodded, almost imperceptibly, as though he understood. Then he glanced moodily away across the field.

I followed his eyes and saw approaching us

IN AN ENEMY I FIND A FRIEND

from the grove two men bearing the body of a third.

"Is that his work?" I asked.

"Yes," said Dubosq; and fell silent until the bearers reached the road and placed the body on the grass beneath the tree. I saw with a shudder that the man had been stabbed in the back.

"Yes," repeated Dubosq fiercely, "that is his work. He crept upon him from behind and struck him down. He did not hesitate because his victim's back was turned. Oh, these traitors, these aristocrats, with their talk of honor!" and he shook his clenched fists above his head.

"But how did he escape?" I queried, for even yet I did not understand.

"How did he escape?" yelled Dubosq, his face purple. "He escaped because his wits are better than ours. There is that to be said for the aristocrats—their wits are better than ours, clods that we are! He murdered this man——"

"Not murder, citizen," I interrupted. "Not that—self-defense."

"Self-defense!" roared Dubosq. "In the back? Murder, I say! Then shielding himself in that ditch yonder, he worked his way back to the road, mounted your horse and was off, while we were blundering around in that little grove. I should have thought of the ditch;" and he stood glowering at it. "I did—too late! I disgust myself!"

"And I suffer in consequence," I added. "Come, my friend, confess that you believe my story. Look at me. I am no conspirator—in

THE PATH OF HONOR

your heart you know it. If I had been the friend of that fellow, I would have ridden away behind him; certainly I should not have remained here waiting for your return. To revenge yourself on me because your trap has failed—that is unworthy of you. Besides I have suffered enough already—and for no fault.”

He looked at me for a moment, and his face softened. I saw that the storm was over.

“I believe you, citizen,” he said; “you are free,” and he whipped out his knife and cut my bonds.

For thanks I held out my hand and he gripped it warmly.

“Come,” he urged, “join my troop, pin on the tri-color, and I will make a man of you.”

But I shook my head.

“No, my friend,” I said, “an errand of honor calls me to Poitiers.”

He looked at me with renewed suspicion.

“Which reminds me,” he added, “that you have not yet told me the nature of that errand.”

“I will tell you,” I said, “as a friend;” and I whispered a swift sentence in his ear.

He burst out laughing, his good humor restored in an instant.

“Well, go your way,” he said, slapping me on the shoulder, “and good luck go with you. At the fête, citizen, drink a health to old Dubosq. As for me, I have the pleasant duty of burying my dead, and reporting to my superiors that I am a fool and that the trap is empty;” and he glowered

IN AN ENEMY I FIND A FRIEND

angrily down the road, his mustache drooping dismally.

"Your turn will come," I urged. "Or if not yours, mine—of that I am certain."

"Yes," he agreed, with a growl, "I will yet get my hands on him, and when I do, he will have reason to remember it. Adieu, citizen," he added. "My compliments to the lady. Come, my children, march!" And he and his soldiers set off toward Tours, bearing their dead with them.

I watched them for a few moments with something like regret. After all, Dubosq had spoken truly. I had seen little of the world, and he had offered me a chance to see more in gallant company. I could not but admit that he would have made an admirable guide and companion. If his cockade were only white! But even then I could not have followed him. For I was not free—another duty lay before me. Would I ever be free, I wondered—free to march away whither I listed, to live a man's life and grow to man's stature? Or would I always be tied to some woman's petticoat, imprisoned in a trivial round of daily duties, as were so many men? Was I on this journey simply exchanging one petticoat for another?

With such thoughts for companions,—surely less pleasant than Dubosq!—I turned my face again to the south, and strode along with such speed as my legs could compass. I am not fond of foot-exercise, and it was not at all in this ridiculous fashion that I had thought to make the journey to Poitiers.

THE PATH OF HONOR

Besides there was need that my entry into that city should be made with a certain dignity, and I knew well that the whole contents of my purse would not purchase a new horse, to say nothing of a new equipment.

For the horse was not all that I had lost. In the holsters of the saddle was a pair of handsome pistols which had belonged to my father, and in the portmanteau strapped behind it an array of gallant clothing such as I had never possessed before, and would in all likelihood never again possess. As to replenishing my purse, I remembered only too acutely how my mother had pinched herself for months to provide me with this outfit. No, decidedly, to repair this misfortune I had only my own prowess to depend upon, and I am free to say that it was not of a quality greatly to enhearten me. Certainly my first adventure in the world had ended most disastrously.

So I trudged on, looking neither to the right nor to the left, turning my misfortune over in my mind, and recalling the good points of my horse,—a friend and companion almost since my boyhood,—the comfort of my saddle, and the beauties of my wardrobe, as a starving man will picture to himself the savory details of some banquet he has enjoyed in happier days. And I almost found it in my heart to regret that I had not struck the robber down in that moment when he had dared to turn his back upon me.

There were few people on the road, but such as I met stared at me curiously, evidently unable to

IN AN ENEMY I FIND A FRIEND

understand how it was that a young fellow so gallantly arrayed should be footing it through the dust with sour countenance. This of course served only to increase my spleen, and ended in my pulling my hat over my eyes and trudging on without glancing up, even at the rustle of a petticoat. I know not how great a distance I covered in this fashion, but at last the sun, rising high in the heavens, beat down upon me with such ardor that my head began to swim dizzily. I looked about for shelter, and seeing just ahead of me a little cluster of mean houses, hastened my steps in the hope that there might be an inn among them.

So indeed there proved to be. But when I came to the threshold of the low, ill-smelling room, dark almost as a dungeon even in full day, I hesitated, for I was armed only with sword and dagger and it was impossible to see what lay within. Decidedly I had no wish to risk my purse, and perhaps my life as well, for the sake of a bottle of bad wine.

But a gay voice encouraged me.

"Enter, monsieur," it called. "I was awaiting you."

And as my eyes grew somewhat accustomed to the darkness, I descried, seated at a table in one corner, my enemy, my despoiler, smiling at me as though he were my dearest friend.

"Come," he added, "join me;" and such was the wizardry of his voice and the gesture which accompanied it, that whatever my reluctance, I could not but obey.

THE PATH OF HONOR

"What is your name, monsieur?" he asked, as I took the seat opposite his; and he smiled again as he caught my glance.

"Jean de Tavernay," I answered; "and, monsieur, I have to say to you——"

"One moment," he broke in, holding up his hand. "My name perhaps you have already heard?"

"Yes, if you are who the Republicans said you were."

"And that was?"

"One M. de Favras."

"They are not at your heels?"

"No, they returned to Tours."

"Disappointed?"

"Extremely so."

He laughed, then grew suddenly sober and knitted his brows in thought, which I somehow dared not interrupt. After all, there was no cause for haste. He could not escape me.

"It looked like a trap," he said, at last.

"It was a trap," I assured him.

"And set for me?"

"I believe so."

He pondered this a moment longer, then put it from him.

"No matter," he said. "Why waste thought on a trap from which one has escaped? And now, M. de Tavernay, to your affair. I see the words which are trembling on your lips; I read the thought which is passing in your mind. You would say that I have not used you as one gentle-

IN AN ENEMY I FIND A FRIEND

man uses another. I admit it. You are thinking that now you will revenge yourself. I do not blame you. I owe you an apology for treating you in the fashion that I did. But it was with me a question of life or death. I had no alternative. And I assure you," he added, smiling grimly, "I should not have hesitated to kill you had you chosen to resist. I gave you a chance for your life merely because I saw that you were not a Republican, but a traveller like myself. Had you worn the tri-color, nothing would have saved you."

"All of which I saw in your eyes, monsieur," I said. "It was for that reason I did not resist."

"Well," he asked, looking at me, "which is it, monsieur—an apology and this bottle of wine, or our swords back of the cabaret? For myself, I hope it is the former. But it is for you to choose."

There was a kindness in his tone not to be resisted, an authority in his glance and in the expression of his face which bore in upon me anew my own youth and inexperience.

"The wine, monsieur," I said. "The other would be folly."

He nodded and filled our glasses, then raised his to his lips.

"To our better acquaintance," he said, and we drank the toast. I was beginning to wonder how I had ever been so blind as to think this man an enemy.

"There was one moment," I confessed, "when you were in some danger."

THE PATH OF HONOR

"I saw it," he said quietly. "It was for that reason I turned my back to you."

I stared at him in amazement.

"To help you overcome temptation," he explained. "One gentleman does not break his word by stabbing another in the back."

A warm flush of pleasure sprang to my cheeks. Then a sudden vision rose before me of a limp body in Republican uniform——

"But you——" I stopped, confused, conscious that I was uttering my thought aloud, and that the thought was not a pleasant one.

"Ah," he went on, smiling sadly, "you would say that I stabbed that poor fellow in the back. Believe me, monsieur, I should have preferred a thousand times to meet him face to face. But I had no choice. A moment's delay, and I should have been taken. So I hardened my heart and struck."

"Pardon me, monsieur," I murmured.

He nodded, the shadow still on his face.

"Fortune of war," he said, with affected lightness. "We must make the best of it. And now, M. de Tavernay," he added, rising, "you will find your horse awaiting you outside yonder door, as fresh as when you started with him from Tours. I have secured another in a less peremptory way than I found necessary to adopt with you. It is foolhardy for me to linger here. I must push on at once. But you may be weary, you may wish to avoid the heat of the day; you may, in a word, prefer to continue your journey alone and at your

IN AN ENEMY I FIND A FRIEND

leisure. If so, farewell; but if you are ready to go on, I assure you that I shall be very glad of your company."

"Thank you, monsieur," I said, my decision taken on the instant. "I am quite ready to go."

"Good! come then," and throwing a gold-piece on the table he started toward the door.

Not until that instant did I remember that the inn must have a keeper, and that the keeper would have ears, which he had no doubt kept wide open during all this talk. I looked around for him, and as though guessing my thought, he shambled slowly forward from a dark corner—as ill-favored a villain as I ever saw.

"Is there anything else monsieur wishes?" he asked, looking at me with a glance so venomous that I recoiled as though a snake had struck at me.

"No," I stammered, "except to tell you that there is your money."

He picked up the coin without a word and spun it in his hand, while I hastened after my companion, anxious to escape from that sinister place into the clear day. I found him awaiting me just outside the door.

"Our horses will be here in a moment," he said. "I have sent for them."

"I shall breathe more freely when I am in the saddle and well away from here," I answered. "There is a fellow back yonder who is longing to assassinate both of us."

"Our host?" and he laughed lightly. "I

THE PATH OF HONOR

noticed him. He is like all the others—they would all jump to assassinate us, if they dared.”

“This one looked particularly wolfish.”

“They are all wolfish, and like the wolf arrant cowards, save when they hunt in pack.”

“But if he overheard?”

“Perhaps we were a little indiscreet,” he agreed, sober for an instant. “But one peril more or less—what does it matter?” he added, with a shrug. “Here are the horses. Permit me to return you yours, with apologies and thanks.”

“I am rejoiced to get him back,” I said, patting his nose.

“The pleasure seems to be mutual,” observed my companion; and indeed there was no mistaking the joy in the eyes of my old friend. “You would better look over your belongings,” he added. “There are thieves about.”

But I found that nothing had been disturbed. My pistols were in their holsters, and my port-manteau was still strapped behind the saddle.

“Then let us be off,” said M. de Favras.

Not until we were well out of the village and cantering briskly toward the south with a clear road behind us, did I feel at ease. Then I took my chin from my shoulder and directed an admiring gaze at my companion—would I ever acquire such an air? He caught my glance and smiled.

“Where had you intended spending the night, M. de Tavernay?” he inquired.

“At Châtellerault,” I said.

“But you cannot hope to reach Châtellerault

IN AN ENEMY I FIND A FRIEND

to-day," he protested, "after the delay which I have caused you. You must be my guest to-night. My château is just beyond Dange. I will see you on your way at daybreak to-morrow, and you can reach Poitiers with ease by sunset. I hope you will accept, my friend," he went on, seeing that I hesitated, "if only that I may feel you have wholly forgiven me. Besides," he added, with an air of finality, "it is folly to travel unattended in this country after nightfall. It is overrun with brigands who shout for liberty, equality, fraternity, only to conceal their crimes."

Truth to tell, I needed no urging. I tried to stammer something of the pleasure the invitation gave me, but he stopped me with a kind little wave of the hand.

"For the past month I have been in the Bocage," he went on, when that was settled. "Ah, if you would see true heroism, my friend, you must go there. A devoted people, fighting for their homes and for their faith, under leaders the most heroic that army ever had. It is against those peasants of La Vendée that this cursed carnival of slaughter will wreck itself."

His face was alight with enthusiasm, his eyes shining with deep emotion.

"They are carrying all before them," he went on, more calmly. "To-day, they are mere scattered peasants, working in their fields. To-morrow, they are an army of fifty thousand, springing from the very ground to smite the enemy. They shoot him down from behind their hedges, they put him

THE PATH OF HONOR

to the sword, they send him staggering back to his barracks, all but annihilated. Then the next day, if there is no more fighting, they are back again with their flocks and herds. It recalls that golden age of Greece when every man was eager to give his life for his country."

"But surely," I objected, "trained troops should be able easily to stand against them."

"They have not yet done so," he retorted. "We have taken Les Herbiers, Montaigu, Chantonay, Cholet and Vihiers, one after the other, like shaking ripe plums from a tree. After all, victory depends not so much upon organization or generalship, or even numbers, as upon the spirit of the men themselves. The army which goes into a battle with each individual unit of it bent on victory wins the victory. The army which fights half-heartedly loses. That is the history of every battle. The people of the Bocage are fighting for their homes and their religion—their souls are in the conflict, and they will never admit themselves defeated until the last man has been slain. Within a month the Blues will have been driven completely from Vendée, and the King will reign there;" and at the words he crossed himself. "'God and the King' is our watchword."

He saw the question in the glance I turned upon him.

"You are wondering," he said, "why at such a time I should have left the army. Two nights since I received a message that my wife was

IN AN ENEMY I FIND A FRIEND

dangerously ill—dying even. The army will be victorious without me—but my wife——”

He stopped. I understood and nodded gently.

“Only that could have brought me away,” he added—“the certainty that she needed me. I started at once but found the Blues in force at Coulonges. I attempted to turn aside and at once lost my way amid the innumerable and abominable roads with which that country is cursed. I was forced finally to ride on to Chinon and then along the Loire, for it seemed as though every road was blocked by the enemy. I should have reached the château last night, and behold me only this far;” and he pricked his horse savagely and galloped forward.

I followed, and for a time we held the pace without exchanging a word, he busy with his own thoughts, and I wrapped in contemplation of the marvellous turn of fortune which had not only restored me all that I had lost, but which had also given me the friendship of a man like this. I looked at him from time to time, admiring more than ever the fine face and graceful figure. He was, I judged, not over thirty; but there was something in the glance of his eye, in the set of his lips, which told me that he had played his part in the world for many years. Perhaps the time was at hand when I should play my part, too.

At last we drew rein to give our horses breath, and my companion pointed out to me some of the features of the country. To our right was the

THE PATH OF HONOR

gentle valley of the Vienne, and finally we dipped into it and crossed the river at a ford.

"Now I am at home," he said, looking about with a smile of pleasure. "But in this case home is not without its dangers, for I may be recognized at any turn, and the adventure of this morning warns me to be careful. At the village, there may even be another detachment of Republicans. So I think it would be wise to turn aside and take that path yonder, by which we shall not only avoid the town but come directly to my estate."

"Very well, monsieur," I agreed; and in another moment we had plunged among the trees.

The soft earth of the wood, with its carpet of leaves, deadened the sound of our horses' hoofs and we went on silently among the shadows for some time. Then we turned abruptly to the left, the wood opened, and again I saw the river gleaming before us.

"There is the château," he said suddenly, and following his gesture I saw a lofty tower rising above the trees. "That tower," he added, smiling, "is my heritage from an amorous ancestor, who built it some hundreds of years ago to shelter a fair lady, whom a rival coveted. The tower was designed to withstand attack—and did withstand it—so the lady remained in our family and helped perpetuate it. That brave Marquis de Favras, who died so gallantly on the Place de Grève two years ago, belonged to that branch; so you see we have no reason to be ashamed of it, however irregular its origin. There is the modern wing,"

IN AN ENEMY I FIND A FRIEND

he added, as we came out suddenly upon the road, "built by my father."

It was a handsome building of white stone, and as we approached it I saw two ladies strolling upon the terrace which ran across its front. At the gate, a man, swart and heavy-set, stood for a moment eyeing us.

"Ah, Padeloup!" cried my companion; and at the word the man sprang to the gate and threw it back with a clang, his face beaming. "Alert as ever!" added his master, waved his hand to him and galloped past, while the other gazed after him with something very like adoration transfiguring his rough countenance.

At the sound of our horses' hoofs upon the gravelled road, the ladies turned and looked toward us. Then one of them flew down the steps, her hands outstretched, her face alight.

"Madame!" cried my companion. "Madame!" and he threw himself from his horse and caught her to his heart.

CHAPTER III.

I FALL INTO A PLEASANT BONDAGE.

"THEN you are not ill?" my friend was saying, as I dismounted and drew near. "You are not dying? Thank God for that!"

"Ill?" echoed the lady. "Dying? Nonsense! Look at me!"

"You are adorable!" he cried, and kissed the hands he held in his.

"Sad I have been," she went on, blushing but still gazing fondly up at him. "That was because you were away from me, in danger yonder. Yet I tried to be brave, for I knew that you were serving your country and that you would not forget me."

"Forget you!" he repeated; and my own heart warmed in sympathy as he gazed down at her, his eyes alight. Ah, here was no match prearranged no marriage of convenience, but a true mating. So true that there could be about it no false pride, no dissimulation or pretense of indifference; so true that it was still the lover talking to his mistress, as well as the husband talking to his wife.

I know it is the custom in certain circles in the great cities to sneer at all this—to seek love anywhere but in the family circle; but we of the provinces are not like that. Do not think it. We live

I FALL INTO A PLEASANT BONDAGE

closer to the heart of things—closer to nature, closer to each other, closer to the good God—and I think we are sounder at core.

“But I had a message saying you were ill,” he continued. “You did not send it, then?”

“No; but I bless the sender since it has brought you back to me.”

“And not alone,” he added, remembering my presence. “Permit me to present to you, madame, M. de Tavernay. I began by stealing his horse and ended by gaining his friendship. Be kind to him. Monsieur, this is my wife, Madame la Comtesse de Favras.”

She held out her hand to me with a charming smile, but her eyes and thoughts were only for her husband, nor could I find it in my heart to blame her, for, beside him, I was so crude, so ordinary, worth scarcely a passing glance. Indeed, I was myself somewhat confused at the revelation of my friend's distinguished title and bowed over her hand awkwardly enough.

“You are welcome, monsieur,” she said. “At dinner we must hear the story of these adventures. You have no doubt been all day in the saddle—you need rest, refreshment. Come—but first you must meet my guest;” and she led the way toward the terrace where her companion awaited us.

“What fortune!” cried M. le Comte, as he sprang up the steps, and in another moment he was kissing the cheek of a lady, young, divinely fair, as I saw in the single glance I dared take at

THE PATH OF HONOR

her, who blushed most becomingly as she received his salute.

"My dear," he added, "this is M. de Tavernay. I have already asked Madame la Comtesse to be kind to him. With you, I can only beg that you will not be cruel. M. de Tavernay, this is Mlle. de Chambray, who permits you to kiss her hand."

As I bowed before her and touched her fingers with lips not wholly steady, I was suddenly conscious of the dust and travel-stains which covered me, head to foot. She would think me ridiculous, no doubt; but when I summoned courage to glance up at her, I was astonished to see that her face was scarlet, and that she was staring at me with startled eyes. Then she withdrew her hand and turned hastily away, her shoulders shaking convulsively, and I felt my own cheeks grow red.

Luckily our friends were too engrossed in each other to perceive this bit of comedy—or perhaps tragedy would, from my standpoint, be the better word. A moment later, my ears still burning, I stalked stiffly away after the man to whom I had been entrusted, through a vestibule, up a wide flight of stairs, and into a spacious room overlooking the gardens at the back of the house.

"Dinner is at eight," said the man. "If there is anything monsieur requires he will ring the bell yonder;" and after unstrapping my portmanteau and glancing around to assure himself that everything was right, he left the room and closed the door behind him.

The instant I was alone, dignity and self-con-

I FALL INTO A PLEASANT BONDAGE

trol fell from me like a mantle, and flinging myself into a chair, I stared blindly out through the open window. The garden was a formal one in the Italian style, not large, but elegantly planned, and sloping gently to the margin of the river, which seemed here both broad and deep. Beyond it was a tangle of trees and shrubbery, and farther away, upon the side of a little hill, were the white houses of a village, their windows bright with the rays of the setting sun.

But it was at none of these things I looked—though I see them now as plainly as if they were here before me—for my eyes were turned inward at the tumult in my own bosom, and my brain was wondering numbly why it was that my life, heretofore so bright, had turned suddenly so gray; that the green valleys of the future had changed to sandy, barren wastes; that the very savor of living was as dust in my throat. I had glanced for an instant into a pair of startled eyes, and that instant had struck the boyish carelessness from my heart as with a blow.

But at last I shook the feeling off—or perhaps it was only the warm blood of youth asserting itself—and when the man came with the candles I could proceed with my toilet with almost, if not quite, my old calmness. When it was finished I turned to the glass and contemplated the reflection there. Fresh the face undoubtedly was, and if not handsome, at least not grotesque; but with the memory of my host before me I thought it absurdly boyish. The figure, while erect enough, had not

THE PATH OF HONOR

that easy poise I had marked in him, nor did the garments in which I had arrayed myself fall into those natural and graceful lines which somehow stamp the finished gentleman. As I stared gloomily at myself I recalled the careless words of Sergeant Dubosq. Yes, he was right; he had hit the mark—I was too young, too pink and white, too much of the country.

Comforting myself as well as I could with the thought that time would remedy these defects, I turned away, opened the door and went down the stair. Beyond the vestibule was the saloon, a circular marble room, extremely elegant and well-furnished, and still beyond this the drawing-room, with four large paintings of the French victories of 1744 upon the walls. There was no one in either room, and I was examining the paintings, which no doubt pictured events in which the father of my host had taken part, and which appeared to me of splendid execution, when I heard the rustling of skirts behind me. I turned to perceive Mlle. de Chambray upon the threshold, and the fear of her ridicule was swept away in the burst of happiness at seeing her again.

"Oh, is it you, M. de Tavernay?" she said, hesitating and coloring divinely.

"Yes, it is I, mademoiselle," I answered, trembling at this first time that she had ever addressed me.

"And alone?" she added, with a quick glance about the room. "It is strange that madame is not down."

I FALL INTO A PLEASANT BONDAGE

"She and M. le Comte doubtless have much to say to each other," I hastened to explain, for I too thought it strange—though the rack itself could not have wrung the admission from me.

"Yes—no doubt," she agreed, but she was plainly not convinced, and still hesitated on the threshold.

"It would be cruel to interrupt them," I added. "Besides, I assure you that I am quite harmless."

This time she permitted her glance to dwell upon me for an instant, and I caught the perfect contour of her face.

"I am not so sure of that," she retorted, "unless your appearance is most deceptive. I think I would better join madame;" and she made a motion toward the door.

"If there is any oath I can swear, mademoiselle," I protested, "prescribe it—I will take it gladly. I will agree to sit here in this corner, if you wish it."

"Oh, you will?" she said; and looked at me doubtfully, but with a glimmer of mischief in her eye.

"Yes, mademoiselle; I am capable even of that heroism."

"I hear that you surrendered rather easily this morning," she taunted.

"There was a pistol at my ear," I explained, "and the face of M. le Comte behind it. I saw no reason to throw away my life for nothing more important than a horse. I am doubly glad now that I was so sensible."

THE PATH OF HONOR

She looked at me, her brows uplifted.

"Life means more to me now than it did this morning," I hastened to explain. "Oh, vastly more! So I rejoice that I am not lying back there on the road with a bullet through me. Even had M. le Comte missed me, I should not be here."

"He would not have missed. A pistol in the hands of M. le Comte is a dangerous thing."

"I have never encountered but one thing more dangerous, mademoiselle."

"And that?"

"A pair of brown eyes, levelled at me by a person who knows their power," I answered, and trembled at my temerity.

But instead of being offended she burst into a peal of laughter and advanced into the room.

"Really, M. de Tavernay," she said, her eyes dancing, "I fear that you are not so harmless as you pretend."

"But nevertheless you will remain, mademoiselle; you owe me that reparation."

"Reparation?" she repeated, with raised brows.

"For laughing at me. True you turned away your face, but you could not conceal the quivering of your shoulders."

She colored deeply and this time retreated in earnest toward the door.

"Oh, do not go," I pleaded. "I pardon you—it was nothing. Laugh at me again if you wish, only do not go."

She hesitated, stopped, came back.

"I *do* beg your pardon, monsieur," she said.

I FALL INTO A PLEASANT BONDAGE

"Believe me, it was not in the least at you I was laughing, but at a sudden thought—at the strange chance——"

She stopped, evidently confused.

"Very well," I hastened to assure her. "I forgive and forget. Or rather, I shall not forget, because you laugh adorably."

"In truth," she said, with just a touch of malice, "one would imagine you were straight from Versailles instead of——"

"Beaufort," I said, flushing a little.

"And how does it happen you are so far from home?" she queried, bending upon me a look of raillery.

Then I remembered; my heart turned to lead in my bosom, and despite myself a groan burst from me in the first sharp agony of recollection.

"What is it, monsieur?" she questioned, instantly serious, and coming toward me quickly. "You are not ill?"

"Yes," I said hoarsely, dropping upon a seat. "I am very ill, mademoiselle—so ill that I fear I shall never make a recovery."

"Oh, horrible!" she cried; and sat down beside me, and passed her handkerchief across my forehead—her handkerchief, fragrant with I know not what intoxicating scent. "But a moment ago you were quite well, or seemed so. Is it the heart?"

"Yes, mademoiselle," I answered, rallying sufficiently to perceive that the situation was not without its advantages, and determining to maintain it as long as possible. "It is the heart."

THE PATH OF HONOR

"And you are subject to such seizures?" she continued, still gazing at me anxiously, so near that I could see the dew upon her lips, could catch the child-like fragrance of her breath. Here was a woman different from any that I had ever known or dreamed of—genuine, unaffected, of a sincerity almost boyish.

"This is the first, mademoiselle," I said, gripping my hands tight in the effort to maintain my self-control, to resist the temptation to seize her and crush her to me.

"Oh, how you suffer!" she cried, seeing the gesture and misinterpreting it. Yet now that I have written the word, I am wondering if she did misinterpret it. Looking back upon the scene, I am inclined to think that she saw much more than I suspected, and that I was really merely a mouse she played with. Mouse—that was Sergeant Dubosq's word. But certainly no eyes could have been more guileless than those she turned upon me. "Here," she added, "perhaps this will help you;" and she held a little inlaid bottle beneath my nostrils.

I was not expecting it and just at that instant drew a full breath, with the consequence that for some moments after I could draw no other. Tears poured from my eyes and I must have been altogether an absurd object; but strange to say my companion did not laugh—or if she did I was too disordered to perceive it.

"Heavens!" cried a voice from the door. "What are you doing to M. de Tavernay, Charlotte?"

I FALL INTO A PLEASANT BONDAGE

"Charlotte!" echoed my heart. "Charlotte! Charlotte!" Then I caught my breath again for fear that I had cried the name aloud.

"M. de Tavernay has just had a very severe seizure of the heart, madame," answered my companion. "I was letting him smell of my salts and he took a full breath."

"I am better," I said, struggling to my feet and bowing to madame. "A thousand thanks, mademoiselle. But for your thoughtfulness I might not have rallied. I needed heroic treatment."

Madame glanced from one to the other of us, her face alight with amusement and her eyes with a meaning I did not wholly understand.

"I shall have to command Charlotte to remain near you then this evening, monsieur," she said. "In seizures of that kind it is always well to have prompt aid at hand."

I bowed my thanks. I was not yet quite sure of my voice.

"And when one is subject to them," went on madame, "one cannot be too careful."

"I have already assured mademoiselle," I said, "that this is absolutely the first."

"Then she is very fortunate," murmured madame, pensively.

"She?" I repeated, staring at her. "I do not understand."

"Pardon me—then you are very fortunate, monsieur;" and she smiled broadly.

I confess I did not yet quite catch her meaning. I was therefore the more surprised to see my

THE PATH OF HONOR

companion redden deeply, then rise abruptly and walk to the other side of the room, where she paused with her back to us to contemplate the fall of Fribourg.

Madame smiled again and cast me a glance full of meaning.

"Yes, you have offended her," she said.

"Offended her?" I repeated in dismay. "I?"

"It is always an error," she explained, "to compel a lady to correct herself."

"I beg your pardon, madame," I said humbly.

"No; beg hers," she corrected.

"I do," I said; "though I am utterly in the dark as to the nature of my offense."

"Come, Charlotte," called madame. "Forgive him."

"What!" cried M. le Comte, appearing upon the threshold. "Do you already stand in need of forgiveness, Tavernay?"

"It seems so," I answered, somewhat miserably.

"Certainly for my thick head and dull wits."

At the words, Mlle. de Chambray ventured a glance at me, and I saw a smile scatter the clouds. She struggled to hold it back, to suppress it, but quite in vain.

"Come, you are forgiven," cried our host; and it seemed to me that in his glance also there was a hidden meaning. "I knew she was not hard of heart. And now for dinner."

"M. de Tavernay," said madame, "to you I shall confide Charlotte—or should I put it the other way?"

I FALL INTO A PLEASANT BONDAGE

"Either way pleases me immensely, madame," I said, bowing.

"You must know," madame continued, "M. de Tavernay is subject to sudden seizures of the heart, and that Charlotte is the only one present who can work a cure."

"Our friend is not the first to be so afflicted," laughed M. le Comte, crossing to his wife's side. "Luckily I also found the one person who could work a cure."

"Nonsense!" protested Mlle. de Chambray, very red. "M. de Tavernay was really suffering acutely."

"Well, so have I suffered acutely," retorted her tormentor. "Did I not, madame?"

"Or pretended to," rejoined madame. "With that disease it is often impossible to tell where reality leaves off and pretense begins; you men have made so close a study of the symptoms. But come, monsieur; the dinner waits."

I confess that the arm I gave my partner was not so steady as I could have wished it; for my heart was torn between delight and despair—delight that she should be there beside me, despair at my own stupidity in understanding so little of all this; but I managed by some miracle to enter the dining-room without accident, to get her safely seated and to seat myself beside her.

I drew a deep breath of relief when I found myself in port.

"You have never been to Paris, M. de Taver-

THE PATH OF HONOR

“nay?” asked a low voice at my elbow, and I looked up to find her eyes on mine.

“No, mademoiselle,” I stammered.

“Perhaps not even to Orléans?” and I saw again in their depths that glimmer of mischief.

“No,” I answered, not heeding it as a wise man would. “I have passed all my life upon our estate at Beaufort.”

“Something told me so!” she murmured, and turned to her plate as innocently as though she were quite unconscious of having planted a poniard in my bosom.

CHAPTER IV.

A SCENT OF DANGER.

I BORE the blow with such stoicism as I possessed, and even made some show of listening and laughing at M. le Comte's account of our meeting and subsequent reconciliation. Both women were unaffectedly delighted with the story, which, indeed, was told with a wit and spirit quite beyond my reproduction. As I write these lines I am again impressed with the wide difference between the awkward country boy who sat scowling in that pleasant company and the accomplished and finished gentleman who did so much to entertain it. For I know now that my assumption of ease and interest could have deceived no one. All of us, I think, looking back over the mistakes and gaucheries of our youth must feel our cheeks crimson more than once; certainly mine grow red when I think upon the sorry figure I made that evening. But when I started to set this history upon paper I determined not to spare myself, nor will I.

"But who could have sent the message?" asked madame when M. le Comte had finished the story.

"I cannot even guess," he answered.

"How was it delivered to you? How came you to believe it?"

"I believed it," he explained, "because it was brought to me by one of our old servants—Laroche—whom I left in charge of the stables."

THE PATH OF HONOR

"Ah, true," murmured madame. "Laroche disappeared a week ago. I fancied he had run away to join the Revolutionists."

"Perhaps he did," said her husband quietly.

Madame looked at him with a start of alarm.

"The Revolutionists?" she repeated. "It was they who sent the message? But why? What was their object? Ah, I know," she added with sudden conviction. "It was to deprive the Vendéans of your sword, in order that they might be defeated."

M. le Comte smiled as he looked down into her fond, admiring eyes.

"Ah, my dear," he said, "my sword is not so powerful as that. The Vendéans will win their battles just the same without me. I think the message was merely the bait for a trap——"

"From which you have escaped!" she cried triumphantly, and clapped her hands.

"Yes," he agreed; but there was still in his face a certain anxiety which she perceived.

"What is it, Henri?" she demanded. "You are not now in danger?"

He threw off his preoccupation with a laugh of genuine amusement.

"In danger?" he repeated. "No—or at least the only danger to which I am exposed at this moment, madame, is that of falling in love with you more violently than ever."

"For shame, sir!" she cried, blushing like a girl. "You forget that we are not alone."

"On the contrary," he retorted, "I think our example a most excellent one for our young

A SCENT OF DANGER

friends yonder ;” and he looked across at us with beaming face, and with a meaning in his eyes which I tried in vain to fathom. “I hope they will profit by it.”

“Monsieur! Monsieur!” protested madame, restraining him, yet unable to preserve a stern countenance.

“Besides,” he added, laughing more and more, “it delights me to confuse that pert young lady sitting opposite us yonder—to make her blush, as she is doing at this moment,—and I swear, so is Tavernay! What a pair of children! If their parents had only had the good judgment to betroth them——”

“Monsieur!” interrupted madame, more sharply. “You will not break your promise. There was to be no word——”

“And I will say none; pardon me,” broke in M. le Comte. “The temptation was very great; and I hate to see a fellow-man barred out from Paradise;” and he looked at me, still laughing.

But I bent above my plate, all pleasure in the meal struck from me, for suddenly I found myself groaning beneath my burden. Barred out from Paradise—how apt the words were!—and with bars that could never be removed. Ah, yes, if our parents——

“What is it, monsieur?” asked a low voice at my side, and I raised my eyes to find myself gazing into the depths of those I loved. “You sighed,” she added, seeing that I did not understand.

THE PATH OF HONOR

"Did I?" I said, wondering somewhat that she remained so unruffled by the fire of raillery which had been turned upon her. "One is apt to sigh when there is something one desires very much and yet may not possess."

"Perhaps I can help you," she suggested, and I saw again in her eyes that light which should have set me on my guard. "If it is my smelling-bottle——"

"No, thank you," I answered, with dignity. "I do not need it."

"So you refuse to confide in me, even when I offer you my aid?"

"I fear you cannot aid me, mademoiselle; and if any one in the world could, it would be you."

"I am not fond of riddles, M. de Tavernay; and it seems to me that you have just propounded one."

"I spoke very seriously," I said, "and as plainly as I could."

"Oh, you mean it is my wits which are deficient! I must say, monsieur——"

"I meant nothing of the sort," I protested. "I meant——"

"No matter," she broke in. "Nothing is so wearisome as to have to explain one's meaning—unless it be to listen to the explanation. I am sure it argues dulness somewhere."

"I am sorry that I bore you," I retorted, stung to a sort of desperation. "I had hoped that I might at least continue to furnish you amusement."

"Really," she cried, casting me a brilliant glance, "not a bad *riposte*. Come, we are quits, then?"

A SCENT OF DANGER

"With all my heart," I agreed; "especially since you have removed your button."

"Well, finish it," she cried, her eyes dancing. "Finish it."

"While I am too gallant to follow your example," I added, relentlessly.

"Good!" she applauded. "*Touché!* I assure you, monsieur, you are not boring me in the least. All you need is a little practise, a little more assurance—you hesitate, as all beginners do, to drive the point home——"

"I am not bloodthirsty," I interrupted. "On the contrary, I am of a disposition the most amiable."

"And there is still about you a slight clumsiness," she went on, not heeding me, "a lack of style and finish."

"Remember, I have never been to Paris," I reminded her, "nor even to Orléans."

"I shall not remember it long, for there will soon be nothing about you to suggest it."

I bowed my thanks.

"Especially if I may remain near you," I said.

"Oh that—of course!" she agreed. "Well, you have my permission, and you will find M. le Comte most hospitable; so remain, unless this mysterious business of yours is imperative."

"It is," I said, my face clouding again. "I must set out at daybreak."

"Ungallant man!" she retorted, looking at me with sparkling eyes. "Do you ask a favor only to refuse it? Do you understand what you are saying?"

THE PATH OF HONOR

"Only too well, mademoiselle," I murmured desolately; "and I would rather have cut off my right hand than utter those words."

"Still the riddle!" she cried, with a gesture of despair. "Really, monsieur, you weary me. Whatever it is you desire, I advise you to ask for it. One gets nothing in this world without asking—and if it is refused, taking it just the same."

"But when one may neither ask nor take, mademoiselle?"

"Oh, then," she retorted, with a shrug of the shoulders, "one is certainly in a bad way. One would better stop desiring;" and she turned her shoulder to me in the most impudent manner possible and gave her attention to M. le Comte.

"It is La Vendée which will re-establish monarchy in France," he was saying, his face alight. "Those peasants are unconquerable. There are two hundred thousand of them, peaceful men, tilling the soil, tending their herds, as they had always done, with no thought of resisting the Republic until the Republic attempted to take from them their priests and to draft them forth to fight on the frontiers. Then they rose as one man, fell upon their oppressors, routed them, cut them to pieces among the hedges. Now they are back in their homes again to make their Easter; that over, they will march against Thouars and Saumur."

"But, M. le Comte," I protested, forgetting for a moment my own troubles in the interest of the narrative, "fighting of that sort can be suc-

A SCENT OF DANGER

cessful only near home and in a most favorable country. For a campaign troops must have organization."

"That is true, my friend," he agreed. "Well, these troops are being organized. Once the Bocage is free of the Blues, which will be within the month, our army will be ready to cross the Loire, take Nantes, advance through Brittany, Normandy, and Maine, where we shall be well received, and at last march at the head of a united north-west against Paris itself! I tell you, Tavernay, the Republic is doomed!"

His eyes were sparkling, his face flushed with excitement. An electric shock seemed to run around the board, and madame sprang to her feet, glass in hand.

"The King!" she cried, and as we rose to drink the toast I had a vision of a boy of twelve issuing triumphantly from the gate of the Temple to avenge his murdered father.

"And may God protect him!" added M. le Comte, as we set our glasses down.

There was gloom for a moment in our hearts, and I at least felt the stark horror of the Revolution as I had never done. I saw more clearly its blood-guiltiness, its red madness. For in our quiet home at Beaufort the delirium of Paris had seemed far away, almost of another age and country.

We had shuddered at the stories of the September massacres, but only as one shudders at any tale of horror; even yet we scarcely believed that the King was really dead. It seemed impossible

THE PATH OF HONOR

that such things could happen. Just as the body pushed beyond a certain limit of pain grows numb and suffers no more, so the mind after a certain time refuses to be impressed. It was thus with the reports which came from Paris, as one followed another, each more terrible than the last. Not even the actors in that hideous drama comprehended what was passing there; they were but chips in a maelstrom, hurled hither and thither, utterly powerless to stay or to direct the flood which hurried them on and finally sucked them down.

We of Beaufort were far off the beaten track, and of too little consequence to cause the tide of revolution to sweep in our direction; so it had passed us by at such a distance that we had caught only the faint, confused murmur of it. True, our peasants had for the most part deserted us; our fields were untilled, our flocks untended. There was no money in the till and little meat in the larder. But personally we had experienced no danger, and expected none. We had been content to sit quietly by while France wrought out her destiny, pitying those less fortunate than ourselves, and happy in the safety which our obscurity won for us.

Now I was suddenly brought face to face with the question, What was my duty? Was it to stay at home and permit these scoundrels to have their way unquestioned? Was it not rather to join the army of La Vendée and add my atom to its strength, to do what in me lay to render that cam-

A SCENT OF DANGER

paign against the cannibals at Paris not a dream but a reality? For at last I understood. Those hideous tales were true. The fair land of France lay at the mercy of the vilest of her people——

“Still pondering the riddle?” asked my companion; and I turned to find her again regarding me with a provoking scrutiny.

“No, mademoiselle,” I said. “I was thinking that when M. de Comte rides back to the Bocage I will accompany him.”

Her eyes flashed a swift approval.

“That is a man’s place!” she said. “That is where I would be, were I a man!”

“You will wish me God-speed, then?” I questioned.

“Yes—provided, of course,” she added, looking at me searchingly, “that you are free to go.”

“Free to go!” I repeated, and my chin fell on my breast. What instinct was it gave her this power to stab home whenever she chose?

“Then you are not free to go?” she queried, eyeing me still more closely.

“I confess,” I stammered, “that it was not to don a white cockade I left Beaufort.”

“But surely any mere personal matter of business may be put aside when one’s country calls!”

“Alas!” I murmured, “this is not an affair of that nature.”

“Well,” she said coolly, “you must of course decide for yourself, monsieur; more especially since you seem to wish to shroud yourself in a veil of mystery.”

THE PATH OF HONOR

"Mademoiselle," I said desperately, "I should like your advice."

"But I understand nothing of the matter."

"You shall understand, if you will do me the honor to hear me."

"Would not M. le Comte's advice be of more service?" she asked with a sudden trepidation which surprised me.

"No," I said, decidedly, "not in this instance. I hope you will not refuse me."

She glanced at my anxious face and smiled curiously.

"Very well," she assented. "Proceed, then."

"O, not here!" I protested, with a glance at the others. "Perhaps after dinner, mademoiselle, you will walk with me in the garden."

"In the garden?" she repeated, in an astonished tone, and looked at me with lifted brows.

"I know that it is a great favor I am asking," I continued hastily.

"Yes, it is more than that," she broke in sharply. "It is not convenable. What strange customs you must have at Beaufort, monsieur! Are the young ladies there accustomed to grant such requests?"

"I do not know," I answered miserably. "I have never before preferred such a one. I am not familiar with etiquette—with the nice rules of conduct. If I have done wrong, forgive me."

I saw her glance at me quickly from the corner of her eye, and my heart grew bolder.

"It is a beautiful garden," I went on. "I saw

A SCENT OF DANGER

it this evening from my window. There are paths, seats——”

“I am familiar with the garden, monsieur,” she interposed dryly.

“And the moon will be full to-night,” I concluded.

“The more reason I should refuse you,” she retorted. “It will be a dangerous place. Though I am amply able to take care of myself,” she added.

“I do not doubt it, mademoiselle,” I agreed humbly, “especially with me. That has already been proved, has it not?”

“Yes,” she said, with a queer little smile; “yes, I think it has.”

“Believe me, it is not a ruse,” I added earnestly, “even were I capable of a ruse, which I am not. God knows I should like to walk with you there, but not to tell you what I shall to-night have to tell you.”

She looked at me again with a strange mixture of timidity and daring.

“Very well, M. de Tavernay,” she said at last. “In the garden then—provided, of course, that madame consents.”

“Thank you,” I said, my heart warm with gratitude. “Shall I ask her?”

“No; I will attend to that;” and she smiled a little as she glanced across the board. “But I know that it is not discreet; I am falling a victim to my curiosity. You have piqued it most successfully. Although I can never solve a riddle for

THE PATH OF HONOR

myself, I cannot rest until I know the solution. I hope your riddle will be worth the risk."

"It will," I assured her; and fell silent, nerving myself for the task which lay before me.

"But will you hear what this tyrant is saying?" cried madame—"that I must leave the château to dwell amid the fogs of England——"

"Or beneath the blue skies of Italy," said M. le Comte. "Really, madame, I fear the château is no longer safe for you. The Revolution is looking this way—and not with friendly eyes."

"Does the Revolution, then, make war on women?"

"Have you forgotten Mlle. de Lamballe?"

Madame went white at the retort, almost brutal in its brevity.

"But that was the *canaille* of Paris," she protested. "There are no such monsters here in Poitou."

"Ah, my dear," said her husband, sadly, "I fear there are monsters of the same sort wherever there are suffering and degraded men and women. And since it is us they blame for their suffering and degradation, it is upon us they try to avenge themselves. Besides, since the Republicans are trying to entrap me, they will doubtless end by coming here; and not finding me, they may throw you into prison as the surest way of causing me to suffer."

"We have the tower!" cried madame. "We will defend ourselves!"

"The tower was not built to withstandartil-

A SCENT OF DANGER

lery," her husband pointed out; "and even if the Republicans have no cannon they need only camp about it and bide their time to starve you into surrender, since you could expect no aid from any quarter."

"But to leave the château—to abandon it to pillage—oh, I could never endure it!"

"Better that than to lose it and our lives together. Yes, decidedly, you must set out to-morrow——"

"To-morrow!" echoed madame, in despairing tones.

"M. de Tavernay will accompany you as far as Poitiers. At Poitiers, Mlle. de Chambray——"

"Charlotte goes with me to Italy, do you not, my dear? It was arranged, you know, that you should remain with me."

"I do not know, madame," Charlotte stammered, turning very red. "I—I think perhaps I would better stop at Chambray."

For some reason which I could not fathom both monsieur and madame burst into a peal of laughter, while my companion turned an even deeper crimson.

"As you will," said her hostess when she had taken breath. "I myself think that you might do worse, happy as I would be to have you with me."

"Why cannot you stop at Chambray also, madame?" questioned Charlotte, her face slowly regaining its normal hue. "At least until you find some friend also bound for Italy? You will be quite safe at Chambray."

THE PATH OF HONOR

M. le Comte nodded.

"She is right, my dear," he said. "Accept, and thank her. No one will look for you there—besides, it is not for you they are searching, but for me."

"And where will you be, monsieur?"

"I shall be in the Bocage," he answered simply, "fighting the enemies of France."

Madame bit her lips to restrain their trembling, as she cast upon him a glance full of love and pride.

"That is where I would be also," she said, "if the choice were mine. Madame de la Rochejaquelein accompanies her husband."

"That is true," he assented, "and she is sometimes frightfully in the way. If you knew that country, my love, you would see how impossible it is for women. Besides, I am not Rochejaquelein—I am not a leader, but a follower. I must go where I am ordered, and at once, without question. I shall fight better—I shall be worth more—knowing that you are in safety."

"Very well, monsieur," she said, her eyes shining. "As you will. You know best."

He seized her hand and kissed it.

"We shall have many happy days together," he said, "when the fight is won."

And as I looked at them I fancied that happy future already realized.

"You perceive, M. de Tavernay," he smiled, catching my eyes, "that though I have the honor to be this lady's husband, I have never ceased to be her lover."

A SCENT OF DANGER

"Indeed, that is not wonderful, M. le Comte," I said, with a glance at the adoring face beside him. "Anything else is inconceivable."

"Thank you, monsieur!" cried madame. "You have the tongue of a courtier."

"I assure you, madame," I protested, "that came from the heart."

She laughed as she rose to her feet, and held out her hand to me with a quick little pressure of the fingers.

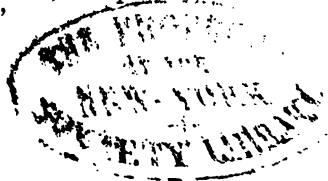
"Do not be long," she said. "We women will be lonely."

I held back the drapery at the door for her and watched her as she passed—the beautiful, fair head, set imperiously upon the slender neck; the little ear, pink-tinted; the rounded, perfect arm——

Then another vision passed and eclipsed the first one, though all I caught of it was a glance from a pair of eyes dancing with mischief.

"M. de Tavernay," said my host, coming up behind me and placing his hand affectionately upon my shoulder, "I confess to you that I do not wish to sit nodding here over the wine. I had not seen my wife for near a month, until a few hours ago; after to-morrow it may be that I shall never see her again. I know you will pardon me when I say that I cannot bear the thought of spending one moment of this night away from her."

"I beg of you to say no more," I protested. "I too wish to join the ladies."



THE PATH OF HONOR

"I knew it!" he laughed; then his face sobered as he looked at me. "Come, my friend, I am going to speak to you frankly. It is a wonderful chance which brought you here to meet Charlotte; I cannot tell you how wonderful—you will learn for yourself some day. Make the most of it. She is a woman worth winning—but you have seen that. What perhaps you have not seen—since there are no eyes so blind as a lover's—is that she may be won."

I caught a deep breath—a breath as much of agony as of joy.

"You think so?" I murmured. "You think so?"

"I am sure of it!" he said, and wrung my hand. "Good luck to you! Remember," he added laughing, "a fortress of that sort is never to be taken by siege—it must be carried by assault!" and he led the way into the drawing-room.

CHAPTER V.

I MAKE MY CONFESSION.

I LOOKED blindly about the room, with M. le Comte's words ringing in my brain, and for a moment I did not see her. Then my eyes found her where she stood in the embrasure of a window, half concealed by the draperies. She was gazing out across the garden at the rising moon and she did not hear my approach until I had come quite near; then she looked up at me with a glance so soft, so caressing, that my heart leaped with a sudden suffocating rapture.

"Oh, it is you," she said, and passed her hand hastily before her eyes. "I was not expecting you so soon."

"The wine had no attractions for either M. le Comte or myself," I answered, a little hoarsely. "I have come to claim your promise."

Without replying, she drew aside the curtain and stepped through the window upon a gravelled walk. I followed her with pulse throbbing strangely. Madame had consented then—I had scarcely dared hope it. But the whole adventure had about it something so strange, so unusual, that I had long since ceased to wonder at it, or to try to understand it. That madame should consent, almost as if we were betrothed, as if all this were a family arrangement—and then my

THE PATH OF HONOR

heart grew chill at thought of the task that lay before me. For I knew that this was the last time that I should ever walk in this garden, or in any garden, with this sweet woman at my side.

The yellow moon was just peeping over the tree-tops to the east, and a soft breeze stirred the leaves upon the branches. Somewhere in the distance a thrush was calling to its mate. The night seemed made for love.

Still without speaking she led the way along the path, past the old tower, to a seat of marble gleaming white amid a setting of evergreens.

"Now I am ready to hear you, monsieur," she said, and sank into one corner of the seat.

I took a turn up and down the path to compose myself somewhat, to quiet the painful throbbing of my heart. How I longed to sit there beside her—to whisper in her ear, to tell her——

"Mademoiselle," I began finally, pausing before her, "believe me, it is not an easy task which I have set myself, nor one which I would choose to face could it be shirked with honor. But since I must face it—since there is no other way—I shall try to do so with such courage as I possess."

"A most disconcerting preamble," she commented. "I tremble at what will follow. If it is so formidable perhaps, after all, you would better take M. le Comte for your confidant."

"M. le Comte has no concern in it."

"And I have?" she asked, looking at me quickly with a little shrinking of alarm.

"Indirectly—yes."

I MAKE MY CONFESSION

"Oh," she said with a breath of relief. "Extremely indirectly, I should say!"

"Besides," I added, "I wish you to advise me—and your advice will be worth much more to me than M. le Comte's, or any other's."

"Thank you; although that sounds somewhat as if it were a continuation of the riddle. Pray continue."

"It is necessary that I should go back a little," I explained. "Thirty years ago my father made a pilgrimage to Mont Saint-Michel to discharge a vow. As he approached the rock across the sands he was suddenly conscious that his horse was having difficulty in proceeding. In a moment more the horse had sunk to his belly and my father perceived that he had blundered into a quicksand. He flung himself from the saddle, and abandoning the beast to its fate,—which indeed nothing could have averted,—endeavored to make his way back to solid ground. He sank to his ankles, to his knees, to his waist. His struggles to escape served only to entangle him more deeply, until at last, seeing them in vain, he set himself to await the end courageously. He glanced around over the sands to make sure that there was no help in sight, then he turned his face toward the cross above the rock and commended his soul to God.

"But the moment he ceased to struggle he robbed the quicksand of its violence. He still sank indeed, but so slowly that at the end of an hour the sand had scarcely reached his breast.

THE PATH OF HONOR

He reckoned that it would be three hours at least before the sand covered nose and mouth, but he knew that the tide would end it before that. Nevertheless, hope began to revive a little and again he looked around for aid, but he had evidently wandered some distance from the road, and the only persons passing were so far away that they did not perceive him nor hear his shouts. So again he resigned himself, and the thought even came to him to renew his struggles in order to bring the end more quickly. But he decided that this would be cowardly, if not sinful, and so waited quietly. He was relieved to see that his horse, struggling to the last, had sunk from sight, so that its sufferings were ended.

"He closed his eyes and even dozed a little, for he had been exhausted by his previous efforts, but he was startled wide awake by a voice shouting. The sand had reached his armpits. His arms, extended in front of him, were covered. He turned his head with difficulty and saw a man standing at the edge of the quicksand. He was tearing off his doublet in desperate haste.

"'Do not venture into it!' my father cried, comprehending his purpose. 'I am past saving. Do not endanger yourself. Take a message for me—that is all I ask.'

"The other did not answer, but spread out his cloak before him and advanced across it. He sank somewhat, it is true, but his feet were not entangled in the sand. At the edge of his cloak he spread his doublet, stepped upon it and drew his

I MAKE MY CONFESSION

cloak after him. But that moment almost proved his ruin, for he had sunk nearly to his knees before he got his cloak spread out again. My father watched him with bated breath as he freed himself and crept forward to the edge of it.

“‘Your hand,’ said the stranger; and he stretched out his own.

“My father disentangled one of his arms and grasped the hand extended to him.

“‘Now,’ continued the other rapidly, ‘you must free yourself by one supreme effort. If we fail the first time it will be useless to try again. So we must not fail. Are you ready?’

“‘Yes,’ said my father, and with a mighty effort heaved himself up out of the sand. Yet he must have failed, must have sunk deeper than ever, but for that strong arm which helped him, drawing him up and forward to the edge of the cloak, which formed for a moment a little isle of safety.

“But only for a moment. Already the sand was pouring over its edges and it was being rapidly engulfed.

“‘We must get back without it,’ said the unknown. ‘Come.’

“Of the desperate struggle which followed my father never told me much—indeed I doubt if he remembered its details very clearly. They aided each other, encouraged each other, drew each other forward—each determined that the other should be saved—and at the end dropped exhausted, side by side, on the firm sand beyond.

THE PATH OF HONOR

"My father's rescuer was a young man of Poitiers—the younger son of a good family—and his name was Louis Marie de Benseval."

I paused. I was indeed somewhat overcome by my own story, and more especially by the memories which it evoked. As for Mlle. de Chambray, she sat with her face so in the shadow that I could scarcely discern her features. She made no comment, only stirred slightly, and I saw her eyes shining up at me.

"I fear I have been prolix," I said. "I have wearied you. I will try to hasten——"

"Please do not," she broke in. "You have not wearied me. I wish to hear the whole story. But will you not sit down?" and she made a little inviting gesture.

"No," I said, resisting it. "I have not yet come to the difficult part. If I should sit there beside you I fear that my courage would fail me."

"As you will," she murmured, and leaned still farther into the shadow.

"The two became fast friends," I continued. "Indeed, friend is scarcely the word with which to describe their affection—it is not strong enough. They were more than friends. Their attachment had a rare, abiding quality—whether they were apart or together, it was just the same. They determined to perpetuate it by knitting their two families into one. They agreed that should one of them have a son and the other a daughter, these two should be considered betrothed from the cradle. And it would seem that Nature, Provi-

I MAKE MY CONFESSION

dence, God, approved of this design, for it so fell out.

“When I was ten years old my father was seized with a fever from which it was soon evident he could not recover. M. de Benseval hastened to him, bringing with him his daughter, a child of eight. We were betrothed beside my father’s bed. It was agreed that on the day that I was twenty-one I should set out from Beaufort to claim my bride. My father died blessing us, and very happy.”

Again I paused, for my voice was no longer wholly steady. Nor did I relish the story I had yet to tell. But I nerved myself to do it.

“After that I lived with my mother upon our estate at Beaufort—a small estate, but one which under my father’s management had sufficed for our support. At first everything went well; but a woman, however capable, is not a man, and my mother was more engrossed in her son than in her fields. So our fortunes dwindled from year to year, and the Revolution, which robbed us of our peasants, struck them the final blow. We were at the end of our resources, and a month ago my mother wrote to M. de Benseval, at Poitiers, stating our circumstances frankly and releasing him from his engagement. In reply came a terse note saying that his engagement was with the dead, not with the living, and so was doubly sacred; that on the day that I was twenty-one he would expect me to set out for Poitiers, where his daughter would be awaiting me.”

THE PATH OF HONOR

"And then?" asked my companion in a voice which seemed a little tremulous.

"Well, mademoiselle, yesterday I was twenty-one."

"And you set out as M. de Benseval commanded?"

"Yes, at daybreak."

"Joyfully, no doubt?"

"Yes, joyfully—why attempt to conceal it? I told myself that I was going to execute my father's last command, that he was looking down upon me with approving eyes. So I was very happy."

"You have forgotten another reason for that happiness, have you not, monsieur?"

"Another reason?"

"You have said nothing of the lady."

"Really, mademoiselle," I said in some confusion, "I fear I scarcely thought of her. I was only a boy. I had never been out into the world. All women were the same to me."

"You mean they are no longer so?" she asked, and again I saw her eyes gleaming up at me from the shadow.

"So little so, mademoiselle," I answered hoarsely, "that I am longing to throw myself into the war in La Vendée in the hope that a kindly bullet will deliver me from the fate prepared for me. Death, it seems to me, is preferable to that a thousand times."

"Come, monsieur," she protested lightly, "you exaggerate. Indeed, I can assure you that a

I MAKE MY CONFESSION

month from now you will again find life very tolerable."

"Why a month from now?"

"Because in that time you will be married, you will have become accustomed to your wife, your heart will have opened to her, and you will have forgotten the mood of this evening—or if you recall it, it will be with a smile of amusement, as at a boyish folly."

"You may think so perhaps," I said, bitter that I should be so misunderstood.

"You ask for my advice," she retorted, "and yet you grow angry when I give it. Shall I not say what I believe?"

"Pardon me," I begged, "but you do not yet understand. I have told you that I have passed my whole life with my mother—for me she was the only woman in the world."

"And now?" she asked. I could have sworn that she was luring me on but for the gross absurdity of such a thought.

"Now there is still only one woman, mademoiselle, but it is not the same one," I answered simply.

To this for a moment she found no reply, but sat gazing out at the river with pensive eyes. The moon had risen above the tree-tops, seeking her; and finding her at last, caressed and threw a halo round her. I turned a little giddy at her pure, transcendent beauty, and my heart hungered for her.

At last she roused herself.

THE PATH OF HONOR

"Well, monsieur," she said, "now that perhaps I understand a little better, do you still desire my advice?"

"Yes, mademoiselle; more than I can say."

"Not, I hope, as to whether you should prove false to this betrothal?"

"Oh, no!—there can be no question of that. That is a matter which concerns not my honor alone, but that of my father also."

"Yes," she assented; "M. de Benseval was right—the engagement is with the dead, and so is doubly sacred. So far we are agreed. What is it, then, that you propose?"

"I propose to turn aside from my journey to Poitiers, and follow M. le Comte back to the Bocage. Can I do this with honor, mademoiselle?"

"What will you do in the Bocage?"

"I will seek death," I answered; and I know that I spoke sincerely. "And it may be that my death will be of some service to France."

She sat a moment looking up at me, a strange light in her eyes.

"I do not like to advise," she began at last, and I fancied that her lips were trembling. "It is so serious a matter."

"I beg you to," I urged. "It is the greatest favor you can do me."

"A man is the best judge of his own duty."

"He should be," I admitted; "but in this case I fear that I cannot see clearly."

"But neither may I," she objected.

I MAKE MY CONFESSION

"Ah, I am sure you will; in fact, mademoiselle, I suspect that you see so clearly that you fear to wound me. But to refuse to help me would be to wound me far more deeply."

"Well, then," she said, a little hoarsely, "since you will have it so, I must tell you that to my mind your betrothed has the first claim upon you. Not until you have fulfilled your engagement with her,—the engagement for which your father has your word,—is your life your own to cherish or throw away; not even then, for surely she will have some claim upon it."

"Not so great a claim as my country," I protested.

"Perhaps not," she assented; "but at present her claim is greater than your country's. To desert her would be to dishonor her; a betrothal is a sacred thing, almost as sacred as marriage itself. To break it, to cast it aside, to disregard it even for a time, would be cowardly and ignoble. You must go on to Poitiers. That way lies the path of honor."

She spoke with a simple, fearless, deep sincerity which moved me strangely. Ah, here was a woman! Here was a woman!

"You are right, mademoiselle," I said, and bent and kissed her hand. "A thousand times right. I thank you."

Then with such agony at my heart that I knew not whither I went, I turned and left her.

CHAPTER VI.

EVE IN THE GARDEN.

BUT that clear voice recalled me ere I had taken a dozen steps.

"What is it? Whither do you go?" she asked. "Not forward to Poitiers at this hour!"

"Oh, no!" I answered. "I was merely going to—to think—to fight it out. But I was rude. Pardon me. I—I did not realize what I was doing."

"You are pardoned," she said; and her voice was siren-sweet. "Perhaps I can help you to fight it out, my friend—at least I should like to help you. Besides I have not yet done talking to you. I have some further advice at your disposal, if you care for it."

"I *do* care for it," I said; and turned instantly back to her. "You are very kind."

"I wish to be kind," she murmured; and looked up at me with a smile that set my head to whirling. "But before I proceed," she added, "you must sit here beside me. I can't talk to you when you are prowling up and down like that. I feel as though I were *tête-à-tête* with a wild animal, and it disconcerts me."

She patted the seat with an inviting hand, and smiled again that alluring smile. I sat down obediently and looked at her, noting how the moon-

EVE IN THE GARDEN

light touched her hair with silver and gave a strange glory to her face.

"Since you are betrothed to another, M. de Tavernay," she began, turning in the seat so that she faced me, "doubly betrothed, with a tie there is no breaking, and since I have satisfied myself that you are a man of honor, I feel that I can be quite frank with you—almost as I should be with my own brother, did I have one. What is it?" she asked, noticing the cloud which swept across my countenance.

"Nothing, nothing," I hastened to say. "Only there was a sting in the words, as well as kindness."

"A sting?" she repeated. "I fear you are very thin-skinned, M. de Tavernay."

"Perhaps I am," I admitted humbly. "I shall try to remedy the fault."

"Do," she urged. "But I was about to say that you have not yet wholly explained yourself."

"I think I have told the whole story," I said, casting my mind back over its details. "I can think of nothing that I have omitted."

She sat for a moment looking at me, her lips parted, the color coming and going in her cheeks.

"You said some time ago," she went on at last, "that I was concerned with this story—that it was for that reason you desired my advice."

"Yes, that is true, mademoiselle."

"Well, you have not yet explained to me what you meant by that, my friend."

A sudden trembling seized me as I met her eyes.

THE PATH OF HONOR

"I thought you knew," I began hoarsely. "I thought you guessed."

"I am not good at guessing," she said, looking up at me, her eyes radiant, her hands against her heart.

"I meant," I stammered, "I meant——"

But my lips refused to form the words; my heart turned faint——

"Oh," she said, in a low voice. "I understand;" and she played for a moment with the rose at her bosom. "You mean, then, that it is I who have wrought this change in you?"

"Yes," I assented; and caught my breath to choke back the sob which rose in my throat.

She looked at me with a little frown, which changed in an instant to an arch smile.

"Come," she said, "confess that you are easily impressed, and that you will forget as easily."

"I shall never forget!"

"Remember the proverb—'That which flames at a touch dies at a breath.'"

"I care nothing for proverbs. I know my own heart."

"But consider, my friend;" and she leaned forward in her earnestness until she almost touched me, until the sweet glow of her body penetrated to me. "You have known me only a few hours. I am the first woman you have met on riding forth into the world. You mistake a goose for a swan. I assure you that there are many women beside whom you would not give me a second glance. Indeed, it is very possible that

EVE IN THE GARDEN

your betrothed may be one of them. So you will soon recover from this madness; in a day or two it will have quite passed away. The path of honor leads you to Poitiers and there you will find happiness as well. In time you will come to wonder at this night's emotion, and to laugh at it. You will look back and you will say to yourself, 'What a fool I was!'"

"It is true," I said slowly, "that I may be a fool in desiring what I can never hope to possess; but at least, mademoiselle, do me the justice to believe that I shall never cease to desire it. I do not know how to tell you, for I have no skill in the phrases of love. I only know that you have touched in me a chord which will never cease to beat until the heart itself is still. It is not your beauty, though you are very beautiful; it is not the tone of your voice, though that is very sweet; it is not your smile, though that drives me to madness. It is something beyond and behind all that; it is something which for want of a better name I call your soul—that which looks out of your eyes so clear and pure that I tremble before it, knowing my own unworthiness. It is your soul that I love, mademoiselle, and no lapse of time, no chance of fortune—nothing in earth or heaven—can alter that love one atom."

I have heard that love gives eyes to the blind, ears to the deaf, a tongue to the dumb. I know that at that moment, as my heart burned within me and the words rushed unbidden to my lips, the world appeared a small and trivial thing, with

THE PATH OF HONOR

nothing worthy in it save me and this woman and the love I had for her. I have no words to describe the emotion which shook me, the passion which flowed in my veins and took possession of my being. It was as if a sudden miracle had been wrought in me, a sublimation of everything unworthy; it was as though I had climbed a mountain peak and come out under the clear stars, in the thin pure air, with nothing between myself and God. I have never again reached a height quite so sublime, or experienced a bliss quite so poignant.

I was too blinded for the moment by my own emotion to see my companion clearly; only her starry eyes I saw, and her parted lips, and her clasped hands. Then she drew away from me and seemed to shake herself as though awaking from a dream; and a cold breath blew upon me, and I, too, awoke. The spell was broken, the vision ended, the glorious moment gone.

"Indeed," she said, her voice not wholly steady, but her eyes instinct with mischief, "it seems to me that you are fairly eloquent, M. de Tavernay, despite your lack of practise. I tremble to think what you will be in a year's time."

"I shall be just what I am now," I said doggedly, wounded at her tone. "You have sounded the height and depth of my eloquence."

"And am I to believe all this?"

"If you do not, mademoiselle, it is not because it is not true."

"But your betrothed," she persisted, "has she no attractions?"

EVE IN THE GARDEN

"I have not seen her since she was a child of eight," I answered coldly. "I remember only that she had white hair and a red nose."

She burst into a peal of laughter which shook her from head to foot, and which I thought exceedingly ill-timed.

"Many children have," she said, when she could speak articulately. "I should not allow such little things as those to prejudice me against her. No doubt her hair is darker now, and that redness of the nose may have been only temporary. Perhaps her memory of you is no more complimentary."

"That is very likely," I admitted.

"Think, then," she cried, "how agreeably she will be surprised when she sees you! Unless indeed she has already lost her heart to some handsome fellow of Poitiers."

"I trust not," I said. "I trust not."

"And why?" she queried sharply.

"I would not wish her to be unhappy also."

She sat a moment silent at that.

"You mean that even if she has," she asked at last, "you will hold her to the betrothal?"

"Oh, no!" I answered, instantly; "she would be free—that is, if she chose to be free."

"If she chose to be?"

"Her father would hold her to her oath," said I.

"And you believe he would have a right to do that?" she demanded, wheeling upon me fiercely. "You believe that he would have a right to compel her obedience, to force her into this marriage, to make her miserable?"

THE PATH OF HONOR

"Yes," I answered, after a moment's thought, "I am sure he would. The law is very clear."

"Oh, the law!" she cried, impatiently. "I was not thinking of the law—I care nothing for the law—a poor, stumbling device of stupid men, whose meaning even they do not understand! Would he have the *right*?"

"Yes," I repeated, "I believe he would. He had passed his word."

"And his word is of more importance than his daughter's happiness?" she demanded, her eyes blazing.

"Undoubtedly," I answered, feeling myself on firm ground at last. "His honor is of more importance to him than anything else on earth."

"Honor!" she echoed, contemptuously. "An empty word men frighten women with!"

"No!" I cried. "A rock to cling to in time of storm, even as I am clinging to it now."

She sat for a moment looking at me darkly.

"You men are all alike," she said at last. "Lords of creation, before whom we women must bow in all humility."

"Even as you are doing at this moment," I retorted.

She laughed at that, and the cloud vanished from her face.

"Thank you," she said. "After all, I was tilting at windmills. There is small danger that your betrothed has given her heart into another's keeping. More probably she is guarding it sacredly for you. A girl has not a man's oppor-

EVE IN THE GARDEN

tunities for falling in love—nor a man's temptations. Besides—oh, I can be frank with you, for I feel almost like your sister!—permit me to tell you, monsieur, that I think you a very handsome fellow, quite capable of consoling her for the loss of any girlish flame!"

I did not like the words, nor the tone in which they were uttered. They lacked that sympathy, that consideration, which I felt I had the right to expect from her. Perhaps, too, my vanity was wounded by my very evident failure to touch her heart.

"You are not treating me fairly, mademoiselle," I said, "nor kindly."

"You will pardon me," she retorted, her face fairly beaming, "if I fail to see the situation in such tragic light as you. It has for me an element of humor."

"It is fortunate that I at least continue to amuse you," I said grimly.

"Yes; there are not many people who amuse me. Besides, I am quite certain that a year hence, when you look back at this night, you also will be amused. I am flattered by your passion, since it proves that under certain favorable circumstances I am not devoid of attraction. But I should be extremely foolish to take it seriously—more especially since you are already betrothed."

"You are right," I assented bitterly. "I am a coward to try to entangle you."

"Oh, you will not entangle me," she answered easily. "I shall take good care to keep a tight

THE PATH OF HONOR

grip on my heart. But all that does not prevent me liking you immensely, M. de Tavernay. I have often wished," she went on, gazing at me from under half-closed lashes in a most provoking fashion, "that it were possible for me to have as a friend a man in whom I could wholly trust—a man young enough to understand the illusions of youth—young enough not to adopt toward me that paternal attitude which I detest—one whose kindness and sympathy I could always count upon and in whom I could confide. But I told myself that such a wish could never be fulfilled; that such friendships were too dangerous, that such a man did not exist. And yet, behold, here I have found him and he is bound in such a manner that there is no danger for either of us."

"I would not be too sure of that, mademoiselle," I interrupted. "The bonds have not yet been forged which could not somehow be broken."

"But bonds of honor!" she protested. "It is your word!"

"Yes, even those! There is a limit to endurance;" and I gripped my hands together to keep them away from her.

"Well, that limit shall not be passed, M. de Tavernay," she assured me, her lips breaking into a smile, and, quite regardless of her danger, she leaned nearer to me. "Besides I have a deep confidence in you. The sentiments you have to-night expressed completely reassure me—I see now how foolish I was to think there could be any risk in coming here with you."

EVE IN THE GARDEN

It was a two-edged compliment and I did not relish it, but she was gazing up at me with eyes so guileless and trusting that I choked back the words which rose in my throat. Perhaps, had I been older and more experienced with women, I might have seen the flicker of mischief which I suspect dwelt in their depths. Guilelessness is a favorite snare of Circe's.

"Let me whisper you a secret," she added, leaning toward me, a little quirk at the corner of her lips, "your betrothed is a charming girl!"

"Oh, you know her!" I said, and stared at her gloomily, for she seemed to delight in torturing me.

"No—I have never met her—have never even seen her," and she laughed to herself as she uttered the words; "but I have heard her spoken of. With her, you will soon forget this poor Charlotte de Chambray—you will fall in love with her even more desperately than you have with me, and she will make you happy."

"And will you regret that, mademoiselle?" I asked, realizing the folly of the question, but unable to suppress it.

"Not in the least!" she retorted, and burst into a peal of laughter at sight of my crestfallen countenance—though it seemed to me that her face showed traces of crimson, too.

But there is, as I had said, a limit to endurance. Her mockery raised in me suddenly a fierce madness—a carelessness of what might follow. I groped for her blindly, my arms were about her,

THE PATH OF HONOR

crushing her to me with a sort of savage fury. The mockery was gone from her eyes now; she tried to beat me off, then, with a little sob, hid her face upon my shoulder. But pity was not in me, only a fierce exulting, and I raised her face, I lifted her lips to mine and kissed them desperately, passionately, again and again.

Then I released her and stood erect, my blood on fire, a great joy at my heart.

CHAPTER VII.

I DARE AND AM FORGIVEN.

For a moment she did not stir, only sat there crushed and dazed, staring straight before her, as though not understanding what had happened. And looking down at her my mood of exultation in my triumph changed suddenly to one of pity for her weakness. I had felt precisely the same emotion many times before, when, having brought down a bird or a rabbit by some daring or difficult shot, I came to the spot where my victim lay bleeding its life out. Pity for my victim always outweighed the satisfaction which the successful shot had given me, and I would tramp sadly home, resolved to hunt no more.

So, gazing down at that bowed head, I felt pity for her rise warm within my heart. She was right. Men were brutes—crushing women by their strength, pulling them down, taking their will of them, then faring gaily on without a thought for the shame and suffering they left behind. So it had always been.

At last she looked up at me, and her eyes were very cold.

“Was that the act of a gentleman?” she asked.

“It was not,” I said, and at my tone I saw her start and look up at me more keenly. No doubt

THE PATH OF HONOR

she had expected to hear in my voice a note of triumph.

"You are ready, then, to apologize?" she continued, after a moment.

"I sincerely beg your pardon, mademoiselle."

"You see I was wrong to trust you—to come here into the garden with you. But I thought you a man of honor!"

"I thought myself so," I said.

"And your excuse?"

"I was tempted and I fell."

"That has been man's retort since the days of Adam!" she said with scorn. "A retort which I consider ungenerous and ungentlemanly."

"Well, it has not been without some justification," I said, my spirits rising, as I saw that here, at least, was a victim capable of self-defense. "But I apologize."

"You promise that the act shall never be repeated?" she asked with great severity.

"I promise that freely."

"But will you keep the promise? You see I have a reason to distrust you, M. de Tavernay."

"Yes, I will keep it," I said. "I have the memory of this night to live on;" and my heart warmed at the thought. "Always I shall have the memory of this night to live on!"

She flushed slightly and her eyes softened and wavered, but only for an instant.

"And what of your loyalty to your betrothed?" she queried with biting irony.

But even that failed to wound me, to pierce the

I DARE AND AM FORGIVEN

garment of joy in which I was once again enveloped.

"It shall never again be broken," I said. "But nothing she can do will change the past."

"You mean you would not have it changed?"

"No!" I cried. "No! It is the dearest thing I have. I am proud of it! I glory in it! I shall keep it always warm against my heart."

"Do you know, I suspect you are something of a poet, M. de Tavernay?" she said, after a moment's inspection of my face from under half-closed lids.

"Oh, no!" I protested. "It is love makes me appear so."

Again she contemplated me for a moment, a puzzling smile playing about her lips.

"Come, monsieur," she said suddenly, "I am going to be generous. Sit down again. You see, I have faith in you. Besides, I wish to keep my friend, if I can. After all, perhaps you *may* care for me—although, I repeat, it is only for the moment."

"You do not really think so," I interrupted; "but let it pass."

"Besides, you are very young."

"Not so young as you, mademoiselle."

"Oh, I am immensely older. I am an elder sister who must take you in hand and form you."

"Oh, everybody wishes to form me," I cried, impatiently. "I have no desire to be formed—I will form myself."

"Who wished to form you?" she demanded

THE PATH OF HONOR

quickly with a peremptoriness that astonished me.

"Why, old Dubosq," I answered. "The fellow who halted me just out of Tours."

She breathed a sigh of relief which astonished me even more than had her question.

"He was a man, that fellow," I added. "I should like to meet him again—a dashing rascal."

"Of course—he flattered you," she said, looking at me coolly. "I know what he said to you as well as though I had heard him say it."

"What did he say?"

"He said, 'All you need, my friend, is a little more polish, and you will be a perfect devil with the ladies.'"

I stared at her, my mouth open, for she had caught Dubosq's intonation to a shade.

"And then he leered," she added, "and twisted his mustaches. But the most disgusting thing is that you believed him, and you smirked and would have twisted your mustaches too, but that you are too young to have any. Oh, men are all alike—foul, despicable creatures! And then you come here, riding very erect, those words repeating themselves over and over in your bosom—and you pretend——" She broke off suddenly, and turned upon me furiously. "Are you in the habit of attacking young women in that fashion?" she demanded.

"No, mademoiselle," I stammered, shrinking from this terrific assault which touched every joint in my armor. "I have never before kissed a young woman."

I DARE AND AM FORGIVEN

She looked at me again, caught her breath, her hand against her heart; and then she blushed and smiled and her eyes grew very tender. By some miracle I had found the answer that turned away wrath.

"There, M. de Tavernay," she said, holding out her hand impulsively, "I forgive you from my heart. We shall be friends. And forget that nonsense I was talking."

I bent and kissed the fingers, so warm, so soft, so fragrant.

"If I might have a pledge of it," I said, with sudden boldness. "That flower at your breast——"

"Nonsense!" she cried. "You need no pledge of it. And now," she added, "I must be going in. Madame will be terribly scandalized."

"Oh, do not go," I protested, and retained her hand in mine. "Think—we may never again be alone together—certainly never like this, in an enchanted garden, with the moon looking down upon us, full of counsel and encouragement."

"The moon has never been noted for the wisdom of its counsel," she retorted; "and as for encouragement, you certainly need none."

"But give me a little longer," I pleaded, trembling at the thought of parting from her. "Sit here beside me and let me look at you. Ah, I already know every feature, every curl of the hair. It is not at that I wish to look, but at the soul in your eyes. I know you do not love me, and yet it seems to me that your soul and mine

THE PATH OF HONOR

were destined for each other. I cannot really believe that we are to be kept apart. I hear within myself a voice which says that there can be no happiness for me apart from you. I ask for nothing more than to sit on here forever with you beside me, your hand in mine."

She leaned away from me into the corner of the seat, and I fancied she shivered slightly.

"You are cold," I said remorsefully. "I have been thoughtless. The air is chilly and a mist is rising from the river. May I get my cloak for you?"

"No, M. de Tavernay," she answered, rising to her feet somewhat unsteadily. "I must really leave you. Remember, we are to start for Poitiers in the morning, and I have many things to do."

It would have been selfish to protest, heartless to expose her longer to the dampness of the night.

"At least," I said, "I shall ride by the window of the coach to-morrow, where I can still see you."

"Yes," she laughed, "and I think I can promise that madame will even permit you to speak to me, if you are very good. Come."

I walked beside her along the gravelled path, drinking in her beauty, exulting in my passion, pressing to my heart the cross which tore me. Past the tower we went, past the hedge which framed the garden. I paused for a last look back at it—ah, I had spent a happy hour there!

"There will never be another night like this!" I said. "Never, never can there be another night like this!"

I DARE AND AM FORGIVEN

"Dear garden!" my companion murmured, and threw a kiss to it.

"Then you will remember it, too?" I asked, scarce breathing.

"Oh, yes," she answered, very softly. "It is the place where I have gained a—friend!"

It was not the word I had hoped for, but the most, no doubt, I could expect. I went on beside her, my head bowed. A friend! A friend! Ah, it was something more than that my heart desired.

At last we came to the broad flight of steps which led upward to the terrace.

"I must leave you here, monsieur," she said, and mounted a step or two, then turned and looked down at me with eyes that glowed and glowed with a strange inward light.

A mad impulse seized me to fling honor to the winds, to throw myself upon my knees, to implore her to flee with me somewhere—anywhere—to a wilderness, a desert island, where there would be only we and our love.

Perhaps she guessed my thought, for she smiled tremulously and held out her hand to me very tenderly.

"Take courage, my friend," she said. "There is a voice speaking to me also. It tells me that fate will not be so cruel as you think; it promises that your future shall, after all, be happy."

I bent and kissed her hand with lips that trembled so I could scarce control them. For an instant she laid her other hand lightly upon my head, as though in benediction, then turned and

THE PATH OF HONOR

went on up the steps. But at the top she paused, looked down at me, leaned toward me.

"My love! My love!" I murmured, a mist before my eyes.

She gazed down at me a moment longer—into my eyes, into my soul. Then, with a sudden movement, she took the rose from her bosom, kissed it and flung it down to me with a gesture divine, adorable. When I raised my head from the flower she was gone.

CHAPTER VIII.

A SERPENT IN THE GARDEN.

THE thought of entering the house revolted me. I needed the high heavens to give room for my happiness, the moon and the stars for confidants, the breeze of the night to cool the fever in my veins. To enter the house would be to break the spell, to bring me back again to that earth which my feet seemed scarcely to touch. So I retraced my steps to the white seat at the end of the garden, sat down where she had sat, and abandoned myself to a delicious reverie. I put all thought of the morrow from me—of the morrow when we must separate; all thought of that gray future which would never be brightened by sight of her, by the light of her eyes and the smile of her lips—all this I put away.

I had only to close my eyes to bring her again to my side. What a miracle she was—what a wonder of God's handiwork! The clear and delicate skin, the hair with its glint of gold, the eyes with their arched brows and upturned lashes, the lips trembling with sympathy or curving with scorn, the oval chin showing just a suspicion of a dimple, the rounded figure promising I know not what allurements and perfections—all these I contemplated one by one, and seemed to catch again that exquisite *odeur de femme* which had ravished and intoxicated me as I held her in my arms.

THE PATH OF HONOR

And behind and above all this, the soul—a woman's soul in its delicacy and sweetness, yet with a certain manliness about it, too, in its high ideals, its conception of honor and duty, its courage and devotion, its reverence for the pledged word—something of the oak as well as of the ivy, almost as if she had been raised among men rather than among women, and had come to look at the world somewhat with a man's eye. Yes, and there was something manlike, too, in her independence, her impatience of convention, her self-reliance. Not that all this destroyed or even clouded the woman in her—that quality of siren and coquette which is in every woman's blood. Rather it enhanced it, gave it a sauce and piquancy not to be withstood.

For a moment she had been mine—I had dared and been forgiven. She had been kind to me; she had been moved by my love; she had thrown me a flower at parting. And at thought of it, I took it from my bosom and pressed it to my lips. I inhaled its fragrance, which somehow seemed a part of her; I contemplated its beauty, in which I saw hers reflected. She had been kind to me. I even dared to think she had been kinder yet, did fate permit, and the thought gave me a throbbing joy—a selfish joy, I told myself, since I had no right to make her suffer, too.

Yet human nature is but an imperfect thing, and love is selfish in its unselfishness. In my heart of hearts I was glad—glad that she would remember me, that she would think tenderly of our

A SERPENT IN THE GARDEN

evening in the garden, and of my kisses on her lips. The memory thrilled through me. I thanked God that I had been brave enough to snatch that moment's joy, that there was that between us! That there would always be; no stretch of time nor stress of circumstance could alter it—it was woven indelibly into the texture of our lives. Whenever she thought of me, whenever she visited this garden, yea, whenever any other dared speak to her of love, she must recall that moment when I had held her close against my heart and raised her lips to mine!

And I—could I kiss another woman?

I sat erect with a quick intaking of the breath, for I saw in my path a new pitfall, and one of my own digging.

Must I confess to my betrothed that my heart was in another's keeping, or did honor bid me to keep silent, to simulate affection, to lead her to the altar in the belief that it was she I loved? Oh, I should not shrink from confession; and she had the right to know—yet—yet would I not confess in the hope that she would set me free?

But if she should feel as I did about this marriage, that honor demanded its consummation, that duty compelled her to sacrifice herself, whatever my offenses, would not such confession merely embitter her cup to no purpose? Yet even if I did not confess, would I be strong enough, self-controlled enough to cheat her woman's eyes?

Here was a question not easily answered; a dilemma the most awkward; a problem which I

THE PATH OF HONOR

felt I could not solve alone. I could only hope that during our ride next day to Poitiers I might have opportunity to lay it before Mlle. de Chambray. She, I felt sure, would with her clear vision see instantly where my duty lay.

So I put the problem from me and lay back in the seat and closed my eyes and lived over again, minute by minute, that brief, delicious evening. I recalled every look, every word, every gesture from the instant I had first perceived her on the threshold of the drawing-room until that other instant when at parting she had tossed the flower down to me. I held it to my lips and murmured low to it the words I had not dared to utter in her hearing.

Ah, *mesdames et messieurs*, you smile, perhaps, and shrug your shoulders! But in your own lives has there not been some such moment? At least I trust so! Recall it!—and remember that I was young and ardent; remember that love had come to me not timidly by slow steps, but with one glorious burst of happiness, flinging wide the gates of my heart at a single touch, as, to my mind, love always should. But if you have had no such moment, if you have stopped your ears and hurried on when love called you to tarry—if life is for you so poor, and gray, and savorless—then, I pray you, put this tale aside, for of that which follows you will understand not a word. Nor indeed would I care to tell it to such an audience.

How long I sat there, wrapped in this garment

A SERPENT IN THE GARDEN

of purest joy, I know not—an hour perhaps, or even two. I was aroused by the rattle of oar in rowlock coming from the river at my feet. I glanced out absently across the water just as a boat shot from the shadow of the farther shore, crossed the strip of moonlight in mid-stream, and disappeared again into the shadow cast by the trees which edged the garden.

I saw it clearly but an instant; yet that instant had sufficed to wake me from my abstraction, for it showed me that the boat was weighted deep in the water with a crowd of men who wore about their necks the tri-colored scarf of the Republic.

As I stared down at the river, trying to comprehend the meaning of this vision, a second boat similarly loaded followed the first.

I sat intent, listening to the rattle of the oars. Then I heard the boats grate upon the gravel of the bank and the sound of men leaving them, talking together in voices so subdued that only a faint murmur reached me.

What could it mean? What was the object of this midnight expedition?

Then my heart stood still. The soldiers had entered the garden and were advancing cautiously in the shadow of the hedge. The grass muffled their footsteps, but now and then gun clanked against bayonet, or scabbard against boot. I sat where I was, quite secure in my clump of evergreens, straining my ears, my eyes, trying to understand. I could just discern the squad as it

THE PATH OF HONOR

approached, halted, moved on again; and each time it left behind it a dim figure, stationary in the shadow. As I stared, the leader came suddenly into a patch of moonlight. His face was turned toward the château, and instantly I recognized the rough countenance, the fierce mustachios of Dubosq.

In a flash I understood. They were after M. le Comte. They were posting sentries about the house. Dubosq was making sure that this time his quarry would not break through the trap.

I started to my feet, then instantly sank back again, for the squad was almost upon me. I must get to the house; I must warn M. le Comte; yet to attempt it at this moment was to invite disaster, not only for myself, but for him. I must wait; I must watch my chance; I must get to the house unseen. Dubosq must not suspect our knowledge of his movements. I could picture the fierce joy which filled him at the thought that his hour of vengeance was at hand.

Still the squad came forward. At last it halted so close behind me that I might almost have stretched out my hand and touched the nearest man. I crouched low in the seat and sat with bated breath.

"You understand," Dubosq's voice said, "you are to remain here until you hear the cry of an owl thrice repeated. You will then advance toward the château as quietly as possible and keeping in touch with the other sentries. If any man attempts to leave the house or to enter it, and

A SERPENT IN THE GARDEN

refuses to halt at your challenge, do not hesitate, but shoot him instantly."

"And the women?"

"The women are not to be harmed—that is imperative. They must not escape, but the man who injures them shall answer for it."

"They are aristocrats, like the others," growled the sentry.

"That is true," agreed Dubosq; "but Citizen Goujon hopes to convert them."

"Pah!" said the fellow contemptuously. "Has one of them ever been converted? Answer me that, citizen!"

"Come," said Dubosq, sharply, "I have given you the orders. See that you obey them. Forward!"

The squad moved on past me toward the château, and I cautiously raised my head above the back of the seat and peered around. The sentry had been posted so close to me that I could hear him still growling to himself.

"A Septembrist!" I told myself. "A monster! An assassin!"

But as I looked at him I could scarcely believe that this was the bloodthirsty ruffian whose voice I had listened to. He stood leaning on his musket, staring toward the château, and a beam of light falling full upon his face revealed a mere youth, with features finely chiselled and the dreamy eyes of a poet. His hair clustered about his face in little curls, his lips were curved and sensitive as any woman's. I stared at him amazed; then sud-

THE PATH OF HONOR

denly I understood. This was one of those who fought for an ideal, who fancied that the era of universal brotherhood was at hand, and that the Revolution was to make it possible—one to whom "Liberty, equality, fraternity" was not a mere phrase, but a vision to be realized. I had heard of such, but never until that moment had I believed in their existence. Could it be that after all the Revolution had in it a germ of good, a possibility of light?

I shook the thought away—it was absurd to suppose that good could spring from murder and outrage, that light could come from a darkness so revolting. This was not a moment for theories, but for deeds. I must go; I must make a dash for it. I should fall, of course. He could scarcely miss me in that clear light. But the shot would alarm the house, would give its occupants at least a moment to prepare for their defense. That, at any rate, I could accomplish.

I gathered myself for the spring. Just ahead of me lay a strip of moonlit lawn—it was there that the peril lay—it was there he would bring me down. And the shot would precipitate the attack.

I paused. If there was no alarm at least twenty minutes would be required to post the sentries and to make sure there was no break in the chain. Perhaps there was another and a better way. Perhaps I could leap upon the sentry and bear him down before he could give the alarm.

I raised my head cautiously and looked at him again, measuring the distance. He was humming

A SERPENT IN THE GARDEN

the "Marseillaise," his thoughts evidently far away, for his eyes were lifted and he was staring absently up at the clear heavens. Had I a dagger I could have struck him down. But I had no weapon; and even had there been a dagger in my hand I doubt if I could have nerved my arm to the blow, so pure, so youthful did he appear at that moment—younger than I. And somehow I understood that there in the sky he saw a face smiling down at him.

I shook myself savagely and called myself a fool. Since he had espoused the cause of murderers he must suffer like any other—this was no time to hesitate. Again I measured the distance and noted his abstraction. I would be upon him at a single bound, and, my fingers once at his throat, I knew that he would not cry out.

Suddenly, in the shadow back of him I fancied I saw a deeper shadow move. I strained my eyes. Yes!—there it was—another sentinel perhaps, and my heart fell. And yet, why did he advance so slowly, why did he crouch so near the earth? Was it man or beast?

Breathlessly I watched it, vague, inchoate, scarce discernible; but the menace of its attitude, the meaning of that slow advance, was unmistakable. A man, undoubtedly, since in Poitou no such bloodthirsty beast of prey existed. But who—who? I glanced again at the sentry's unconscious face, so pure, so innocent. Should I warn him? Should I—

The shadow stood suddenly erect, a knife flashed

THE PATH OF HONOR

in the air, and the sentry fell forward upon the grass, coughing softly. The shadow bent over the prostrate figure, the knife flashed again and the coughing ceased.

Chilled with horror as I was, I nevertheless realized that the moment for escape had arrived. I slid from the seat and crept forward toward the house, across that staring disk of moonlit lawn where it seemed that the light of all the suns in heaven was beating down upon me; then, with a deep breath of thankfulness, into the shadow of the shrubbery again. There I stood erect, and softly but rapidly pressed forward. I gained the walk. Before me was the open window—a moment more——

Then I heard swift, soft steps behind me, and a chill of terror ran up my spine and seemed to stiffen the hair upon my head; for I knew that the slayer of the sentry was pursuing me, knife in hand—red, dripping knife in hand! Numb with fear, I nerved myself for the struggle; but even as I turned a powerful and cruel hand was laid roughly on my shoulder.

“Proceed, monsieur,” whispered a hoarse voice in my ear. “Proceed. I will go with you.”

CHAPTER IX.

PASDELOUP.

I STRUCK the hand from my shoulder and wheeled sharp around, ready for any violence.

"Go! monsieur," he repeated. "Go! Do not tarry here."

"Who are you?" I demanded, trying in vain to see his face, which was only a dim blur in the darkness.

"No matter. You do not know me. Hasten!"

"Then you shall not enter!" I said, and braced myself for the attack I thought must follow.

"You are wasting time," he growled, and stamped with impatience. "On your head be it!"

"Why do you seek to enter?"

"I tell you I am a friend. I tell you I come to warn M. le Comte——"

"You told me nothing of the sort," I broke in. "Again, who are you?"

"My name is Pasdeloup, and I swear that if you do not stand aside I will give you a taste of this knife."

I breathed a sigh of relief.

"The gatekeeper?" I asked; and I remembered the glow of adoration which had lighted his countenance as he gazed after his master.

"The same," he said impatiently. "Will you stand aside?"

THE PATH OF HONOR

"No; I will precede you," I retorted; and in a moment more we were both inside the house.

As I turned to look at my companion I saw it was indeed the stocky gatekeeper. Then my eyes were drawn to his right hand, which clasped a knife—a knife red with blood.

"So it was you struck down the sentry?" I murmured, and shivered a little at the recollection.

"With this knife," he answered, and returned it to his belt. "If only the blow had killed them all!"

I pulled myself together with an effort and glanced about the room. It was empty. The candles were guttering in their holders.

"Blow out the lights," I said, "and bar the windows. They may think we are retiring and will wait till we have had time to get to bed. I will warn M. le Comte."

He nodded without replying, and as I sprang across the vestibule and mounted the stair I saw him going from candle to candle with incredible rapidity. I had intended sending a servant to assist him, but there was no sign of any in either vestibule or corridor.

I sprang up the stair and found that the hall above was also strangely empty. There was no time for hesitation. Beneath the third door to the left I perceived a ray of light. I strode to it and knocked sharply.

"Who is there?" called a voice which thrilled me.

"It is I, Tavernay, mademoiselle," I answered,

PASDELOUP

trying to speak calmly. "Dress yourself at once——"

"I have not yet undressed," she said, and threw open the door. "What is wrong, monsieur?"

"The house is being surrounded by the Blues," I said rapidly. "But mademoiselle you must put on a heavier gown than that and stouter shoes. We may have to flee—to hide in the woods—and the night is cold."

"Very well, monsieur," she answered; and my heart thrilled again at the calmness of her tone. "I shall be ready in a moment."

"When you have finished," I said, "blow out your light as though you were retiring. Then wait for me here at your door with your maid——"

"My maid has disappeared," she interrupted.

"Disappeared?"

"At least I cannot find her. No one answers the bell."

"So much the better," I assured her, though my heart was heavy with foreboding. "The smaller the party the greater our chance of escape. Which is M. le Comte's apartment?"

"At the end of the corridor."

"I shall return at once," I said, seized her hand, kissed it and passed on.

M. le Comte opened his door instantly in answer to my knock, and at the first glimpse of my face stepped out into the corridor and closed the door behind him.

"What is it, Tavernay?" he asked. "What has happened?"

THE PATH OF HONOR

"The Blues have arrived," I answered rapidly; "they are posting sentries about the house. I recognized Dubosq, their leader—the same fellow who tried to trap you this morning. This time he is making certain that you shall not escape."

"Nor is that all," said a low voice behind me.

I turned quickly. It was Padeloup.

"Padeloup!" cried his master. "What do you here?"

"I come to warn M. le Comte."

"Of what?"

"The *canaille* of Dange are on their way to sack the château."

"Nonsense!"

"It is to be turned over to them as soon as M. le Comte and the women are taken prisoner," continued Padeloup without noticing the interruption. "Nor is that all. They are to be permitted to seize M. le Comte and to use him as the mob of Paris has already used so many."

"Nonsense, Padeloup!" repeated his master; but his face had paled a little. "Where did you hear such absurdities?"

For answer, Padeloup pointed along the empty corridor.

"Where are your people, M. le Comte?" he asked. "None here—none below—search the whole house and you will find not one. An hour ago they stole away along the road to Dange. I alone could not be bribed or frightened into joining them."

His master stared at him for a moment, then

PASDELOUP

down the empty corridor, his face of a sudden gray and haggard, as the truth was borne in upon him.

"All?" he repeated hoarsely. "All? Even Joseph? Even Marcelle?"

"Yes, monsieur," said Padeloup, laughing grimly. "Even Joseph. Even Marcelle. I do not say that they wished to go. I only know that they were afraid to stay. Where it is a question of one's life or another's, one saves oneself. That is human nature."

M. le Comte stood yet a moment with bent head, as though struck by a heavy blow.

"And you?" he asked at last, looking at Padeloup.

Again Padeloup laughed grimly.

"It is my nature, too," he said. "Only I am not so easily frightened. Permit me to remind you, M. le Comte," he added, "that there is no time to lose."

His master controlled his emotion by a mighty effort.

"You are right," he said. "We must get away."

"There is a break in the line of sentries," I suggested. "Perhaps we can get through;" but my heart fell as I thought how nearly impossible it was.

"At least we can try. Do you get Charlotte, monsieur. I will bring madame."

I sped along the corridor, pausing only an instant at my room to snatch up sword and pistols

THE PATH OF HONOR

and ammunition-pouch. Mlle. de Chambray was awaiting me, wrapped to the chin in a dark cloak, more beautiful than ever.

"I am ready, monsieur," she murmured, her eyes shining like twin stars.

"There is yet a chance," I said. "Come;" and I took her hand. "I love you!" I whispered as we sped down the corridor together. "Whatever happens to me to-night, remember—I love you!"

She replied with a pressure of the fingers and a little tremulous smile.

"I shall remember," she said softly. "Is our case, then, so very desperate?"

"It could not well be more so."

"My friend," she whispered, still more softly, "tell me that you forgive me——"

From the garden came the shrill cry of an owl, thrice repeated.

"Too late!" I groaned. "Too late!"

We were at M. le Comte's door. Padeloup was leaning against the wall, his arms folded, his face very grim. My companion shrank back with a little gasp of dismay at sight of him.

"He is a friend," I said. "Where is M. le Comte?"

As though in answer to the question, the door opened and M. le Comte appeared on the threshold, his wife at his side.

"We are too late!" I cried. "The signal has been given—the sentries are closing in. A moment more——"

PASDELOUP

A great crash echoed through the house, a sound of breaking glass, a clamor of muskets beating against door and shutter.

"To the tower!" cried M. le Comte. "This way!"

We followed him around a turn in the corridor, down a short flight of steps and along another corridor so dark that, trembling at my temerity, I passed my arm about my companion and pressed her to me in order that she might not fall.

"We shall escape!" I whispered. "We shall escape! God will not permit us to be killed like this!"

I fancied that she drew closer to me, but I could not see her face.

"Here we are," said M. le Comte. Then there came the click of a latch, the creaking of rusty hinges, and a gust of cold air rushed out upon us. We pressed forward into the black pit beyond. The door clanged shut behind us, and at the same instant a shot rang out and I heard the pang of a bullet as it struck the iron.

"Just a breath too late!" said M. le Comte with a grim laugh and dropped the great bars into place. "They will not soon get past this door," he added, as we stopped to take breath. "It is as solid as the wall itself. We are safe for a time at least."

"You are there, Charlotte?" asked madame's voice. "You are safe?"

"Yes, madame," answered my companion. "M. de Tavernay has taken good care of me."

THE PATH OF HONOR

She gently drew away from me, but left her hand in mine.

"I hope you will leave her in my care, madame," I said. "It is a welcome trust."

"So your spirits survive even this misfortune, monsieur?"

"Oh, madame," I answered, "they would survive much greater ones if—if only——"

"Well?" she prompted, "if?—continue, monsieur."

"If only I might choose the persons with whom to endure them," I said boldly.

"You are right, Tavernay!" cried M. le Comte. "So long as a man has beside him the woman he loves he can face the world with a cheerful heart. But come, let us ascend to the platform."

We mounted after him, stumbling up the stairs, one flight, two flights, three. To guide her steps in the darkness I ventured again to slip my arm about my companion's waist.

"You heard?" I whispered. "You are not angry that I permitted them to guess?"

"No," she answered softly, and with a strange little laugh. "Perhaps they had already guessed. Besides, I do not think I shall ever be angry with you again, M. de Tavernay."

"Ah, you love me!—you love me, then!" I whispered, rapturously, and drew her still closer to me.

"Not now, my friend!" she protested, tremulously. "I beg of you, not now! Do not forget your promise."

PASDELOUP

"I shall not," I assured her; and we mounted in silence.

Only when we came out into the moonlight at the top did she draw away from me and fling herself into the arms of madame, who embraced her tenderly and kissed her again and again.

The tower was battlemented, so that we could look down upon the château and the grounds surrounding it without danger of being seen by any one below. As M. le Comte and I peered down together I was suddenly conscious of some one else beside me, and turned to see that it was Padeloup. In the stress of flight I had quite forgotten him. With a little feeling of remorse I held out my hand and gripped his great rough one silently, then turned again to a contemplation of the scene below.

But down there all was dark and silent. Not a candle gleamed from the windows; not a sound disturbed the silence of the night. It seemed almost that there had been no attack—that it was all a dream—a fancy—that we had fled from shadows.

"Can they have gone?" I asked. "Is it possible that not finding us they have returned to Dange?"

"You forget," said M. le Comte, grimly, "that single musket shot which almost reached one of us. Depend upon it, they know that we are here."

"For what are they waiting, then?"

"They are preparing a plan of attack no doubt. They are trying to devise a way to get past that

THE PATH OF HONOR

iron door down yonder. They know they have no cause to hurry."

Pasdeloup suddenly held up his hand.

"Listen!" he said.

For a moment I heard nothing—only the insect noises of the night; then from afar off came a sound as of bees swarming—a faint hum, vague, threatening, incomprehensible. Louder it grew and louder, swelling into a kind of roar, as though a great flood were sweeping toward us down the valley of the river. Then suddenly the roar burst forth in overpowering volume; it grew strident, articulate. Lights danced among the trees, and in a moment more a shrieking, cursing mob poured out upon the road, through the gates and over the lawn.

"They have come," said Pasdeloup, "the *canaille* of Dange."

And he folded his arms calmly as he stared moodily down at them.

CHAPTER X.

BREAD UPON THE WATERS.

ACROSS the lawn the mob poured like a foul and hideous flood, reeling in a kind of drunken frenzy, their voices mounting to demoniac screams now that their goal was in sight—waving their blazing brands above their heads, or shaking furiously such rude weapons as they possessed. And as I looked down at them I realized how thin and fragile is the veneer of civilization, product though it be of long and painful centuries. Here it had vanished at a breath. These creatures had reverted to the state of savages, and burned with the lust of blood and plunder. They were wolves indeed—and they were hunting in pack!

“Why, there are women among them!” I cried; and indeed there were certain petticoated figures shrieking as madly as the rest, though there was nothing feminine in the frenzied countenances revealed by the red light of the torches.

“The women are the worst of all,” said M. le Comte. “They devise tortures of a fiendishness beyond man’s ingenuity. They sit day after day watching the guillotine. They are never sated with blood.”

But the mob had reached the terrace, had swept up over it like a tidal wave, and on into the house. Instantly pandemonium broke loose—the crash

THE PATH OF HONOR

of breaking glass, of furniture riven asunder, of doors burst from their hinges. It seemed that in a breath the house itself must be destroyed, torn stone from stone, under that fierce assault. I saw madame shudder at thought of the havoc which was being wrought among the objects that she loved.

"But where are the Blues?" I asked. "Will they stand by and permit this outrage?"

"How could they stay it?" asked M. le Comte sadly. "They are powerless. They can do nothing. As well hope to stay the tide of the ocean."

"They wish to do nothing, monsieur," said Padeloup. "They abandon the château and all it contains to the mob. See!—there they go yonder."

And following his gesture we saw two boats loaded with armed men just slipping into the shadows of the farther shore.

M. le Comte stared at them for a moment, then down at the frenzied crowd on the terrace, and grew white to the lips. At last he turned to his wife.

"Come, madame," he said, in a voice strangely calm, "do you and Charlotte descend to the floor below, where you can at least sit down. If I had only thought to bring a candle!"

"I have one," said Padeloup; and produced from his pocket a piece of candle some six inches in length, together with flint and steel. In a moment the candle was alight.

"Good!" cried his master. "Now you can

BREAD UPON THE WATERS

feel almost at home, madame. Perhaps you may even succeed in getting an hour's sleep. Certainly you will be far more comfortable than on this exposed platform. Let me light the way."

He took the candle from Padeloup's hand and started down the stair. Madame followed him without a word, but her companion paused and glanced at me. I was at her side in an instant.

"What is it?" she questioned, in a whisper. "Why are we banished. There is no danger?"

"Oh, no, mademoiselle," I assured her. "There is not the slightest danger at present. I hope that you will really get some sleep."

"Sleep!" she echoed scornfully. "For what do you take me?"

"For the loveliest woman in the world!" I said. "In that, at least, I am not mistaken."

"Wait until you have seen more of them!" she retorted, with a flash of her old spirit, and started down the stair. But at the second step she stopped and turned back to me. "M. de Tavernay," she said, looking up at me with shining eyes, "you must promise me one thing."

"What is that, mademoiselle?"

"If there is any danger you will call me."

"Very well," I said quietly, after a moment, "I promise."

"Thank you," she said; and waving her hand to me, disappeared down the stair.

M. le Comte was back a moment later, the shadow still dark across his face. He came directly

THE PATH OF HONOR

to the spot where Padeloup and I stood leaning against the wall.

"Now, Padeloup," he said, "tell me what you know of this affair. I confess that I do not in the least understand it. And I want the worst—mind you, the worst! I want to know the very uttermost we shall have to face. Who was it set these peasants on? Who set that trap for me this morning? Whose hand is it aiming these blows at me?"

For a moment Padeloup hesitated, staring from his master down at the château and back again.

"You remember Goujon, monsieur?" he asked at last; and it seemed to me that I had heard the name, though I could not remember where.

"Goujon?" repeated M. le Comte. "No; who is he?"

"One night three years ago, monsieur, as you were about to retire, you fancied you heard a noise in the room above your apartment—an empty attic. You called a servant, and taking your pistols, mounted to that attic. In one corner you found a man crouching. You dragged him forth and discovered him to be a creature who should have been employed about the kennels. He excused himself by saying that one of the maids was his mistress; that, on leaving her, he had lost his way and stumbled into that attic. The maids did indeed sleep on that floor, and you found that he was the lover of one of them. But when she shrieked that it was not with her he spent his nights, you did not heed her; you thought

BREAD UPON THE WATERS

it merely some excuse—some lie. So you contented yourself with kicking the fellow down the steps of the terrace and warning him never again to set foot on your estate.”

“Well?” said M. le Comte, somewhat impatiently.

“Well, that fellow was Goujon, monsieur. Had you passed your sword through him, all this would never have occurred. Six months later you were walking in your woods down yonder by the river when you came suddenly upon a man setting a snare. I chanced to pass at the moment, and we brought him with us back to the château, though he resisted desperately. Three hares were found upon him——”

“I remember,” broke in his master. “Did I punish him?”

“Yes, monsieur,” answered Padeloup quietly. “You caused him to be stripped and beaten, then branded on both shoulders with the fleur-de-lis.”

“Ah,” said the other with a sigh of relief, “I am glad I was so lenient. I might have decreed the gallows or the wheel for the miserable poacher.”

“*Oui, dà, monsieur,*” agreed Padeloup, with a grim smile; “but after all your leniency was a mistake, for there are some men who prefer the gallows to the white-hot iron. That miserable poacher was one of them—although he has since become Citizen Goujon, a deputy of the Republic.”

“A deputy?”

“He arrived at Dange a week ago.”

THE PATH OF HONOR

"You mean it is he who aroused these peasants?"

"Undoubtedly. It was also he who sent Laroche to you with the message that madame was ill."

Then in a flash I remembered where I had heard the name.

"Padeloup is right!" I cried. "When Dubosq was placing the sentries in the garden I heard him say that it was from Citizen Goujon he had his orders. But this Goujon cannot be such a bad fellow, since he gave peremptory orders that the women were not to be harmed."

"Did he so?" asked M. le Comte with a quick breath of relief. "Then it is only me he hates—it is only me he seeks. Well, I can face death. But when I saw that we were abandoned to this mob I fancied—I fancied——"

"Do not fear, monsieur," said Padeloup in a strange voice. "This mob has leaders who will also take care to deliver the women unharmed into the hands of Citizen Goujon."

"Well, and what then?" demanded his master. "Why do you speak in that tone?"

"Because, monsieur," answered Padeloup grimly, "you do not know Goujon. Hatred of monsieur was not the only reason which led to this attack."

"What other reason was there?"

Padeloup looked down at the mob, then away to the east toward Dange, his lips compressed.

BREAD UPON THE WATERS

"Come, tell me!" commanded his master.
"This is not the time for hesitancies."

Pasdeloup cleared his throat gruffly.

"Citizen Goujon has the audacity to love Madame la Comtesse," he said finally.

M. le Comte burst into a laugh.

"Any fool may worship a star," he said. "He cannot drag it down to him."

"Goujon is trying to drag this one down, monsieur," added Pasdeloup quietly, "as he tried once before. This time he believes that success is certain."

M. le Comte grew suddenly sober.

"'As he tried once before?'" he repeated.
"Your meaning, Pasdeloup?"

"Ah, monsieur," answered Pasdeloup, with a gesture indicating that the matter had been taken out of his hands, "it was not by mistake that Goujon entered that attic three years ago. That girl to whom you would not listen—terror had frightened her into the truth. For that attic extended also above the apartment of madame. He had fashioned a hole in the ceiling; he had even planned to descend some night when you were absent. . . ."

"Ah, if I had known!" cried his master hoarsely. "If I had known! But how do you know all this, Pasdeloup?" he demanded, turning upon the other fiercely, a sudden red suspicion in his eyes.

"Goujon himself told me," replied Pasdeloup calmly, "two nights ago at Dange, when he had

THE PATH OF HONOR

drunk too much wine. Shall I continue the story, monsieur, or have you heard enough?"

"Continue! Let us have it all;" and M. le Comte bowed his head upon his breast.

"Expelled from the house and from your service," went on Padeloup, "Goujon spent his days and nights watching the château in the hope that chance might yet give madame into his hands. He lived by poaching, as you happened to discover. After you had punished him he still lingered for a time in your woods, defying death. He was half-mad, I think: he was willing to suffer any torment, face any torture, if he could die with the consciousness of having possessed madame. Not only his passion for her, but his hatred of you urged him on. At last he thought of a better way; he joined the assassins at Paris, and now he has returned armed with a power which will give him his revenge. All of this," he added, with a gesture toward the hall below, "is for the purpose of enabling him to taste that revenge. You can guess now why he ordered that madame should be delivered into his hands unharmed."

M. le Comte's face was livid.

"Is he in this mob?" he asked hoarsely. "Point him out to me, Padeloup!"

"I do not think he is here," answered Padeloup. "Not yet—but he will come—and perhaps, who knows, fate may give you a chance at him."

M. le Comte grew suddenly silent, searching the other's face with eyes intent.

BREAD UPON THE WATERS

"How came you to be with Goujon two nights ago?" he questioned. "Have you been consorting with these scoundrels?"

"If I have, M. le Comte," answered Padeloup simply, "it was that I might better serve my master—that I might pay my debt."

"Your debt?"

"Ah, that is another thing he does not remember," said Padeloup, turning to me with a sad little smile. "But he was only a boy at the time and it was to him a little thing not worth remembering. We lived in a hut on the edge of the wood yonder, my mother and I. Every morning my mother cleaned the sties here at the château and gave the pigs their food. For this she received every day a loaf of black bread, and she managed now and then to snatch a few morsels from the trough when no one was near. For the rest, we lived on the roots and nuts we gathered in the forest, and we were permitted also to use such wood as the storms swept from the trees. In this manner we somehow managed to keep alive.

"But one day my mother fell ill. She could not go to her work; instead, she grew worse and worse, and I had no food to give her. In the course of three days I myself grew so hungry that I could think of nothing better to do than to sit in the sun at the door of our hut and weep. It was while I was doing this that I heard a noise, and looking up, saw approaching me a horse ridden by a being who seemed to me a god. He stopped his horse and asked me what the matter was. So

THE PATH OF HONOR

overwhelmed was I by this vision that I could only point to the door of the hut and to my belly. He dismounted, he entered the hut, he looked at my mother; then he came out, patted me on the head and rode away. I was so dazzled by the sight of him that for a time I forgot my hunger; but at last it pinched me again more sharply than before, and I reflected that after all the visit of the god had profited me nothing. And I was just about to renew my wailing when again I heard a noise, and again saw my visitor approaching through the trees. This time he bore in one hand an iron kettle which he thrust upon me and bade me carry in to my mother. The kettle contained two fowls, steaming hot in their own juices,—the first I had ever tasted."

"Ah, now I remember," said M. le Comte smiling. "I snatched that kettle from the cook just as he had taken it from the fire. I can even yet see his astonished countenance. Well, did it save your mother?"

"No, M. le Comte, she was too far gone for that; but at least she entered heaven with a full belly. She filled herself, slept and never awakened. But it saved me, monsieur, and it is that debt which I hope to repay."

"And yet," said his master, looking at him, "if I remember rightly, that boy must have been at least three years younger than myself; while you are at least ten years older."

"I do not know how old I am, monsieur; I have lost count of it; but I am that boy."

BREAD UPON THE WATERS

"Then you cannot be more than twenty-seven. Twenty-seven!" and he gazed at the squat figure, the gnarled hands, the seamed and rugged countenance.

"No," said Padeloup, "I do not think I am more than twenty-seven; but for many of those years, M. le Comte, I struggled day by day to keep the soul in the body. That ages one, you see."

"Yes," agreed his master, sadly, "I see."

"At first I was only in the way," said Padeloup. "No one wanted me, and I received everybody's kicks and blows. Then I grew big enough to help with the pigs. Since I have been keeper of the gate for M. le Comte," he added eagerly, "I have had an easy life."

"Yet I have found you there whenever I passed, day or night."

"Ah, monsieur has remarked that?" cried Padeloup, his face glowing with pleasure. "There is a corner between the gate and the wall," he explained, "where one is sheltered from the weather. And I have learned to sleep with one eye open, watching for monsieur. It is a thing soon learned. And I sleep none the less soundly."

"I am glad of that," said his master, gently, and stared for a moment gloomily down at the crowd upon the lawn. "This Revolution is not so surprising after all," he added, half to himself.

CHAPTER XI.

AT THE BELLE IMAGE.

BUT the scene below soon drew M. le Comte from his abstraction; for even in the few minutes we had spent in listening to Padeloup's story, told with a rude and simple eloquence which I have tried in vain to reproduce, it had assumed a new and more threatening aspect. The flood which had swept into the château was pouring out of it again, bearing upon its crest furniture, draperies, railings, doors—everything, in a word, which could be wrenched from the building. All of this was thrown into a great pile in the middle of the lawn and a torch applied to it. Then as the flames leaped upward the marauders joined hands around it and started a wild dance.

They had appropriated all the clothing they had found in the château, and it was not without a certain pang that I recognized one of my own coats in which I had taken especial pride making the circuit of the fire upon the back of a sturdy rascal, utterly incapable of appreciating its beauties, and wholly careless of preserving them. The effect under other circumstances would have been ludicrous enough; and indeed I found myself smiling after a moment, so trivial did the loss of my wardrobe appear in comparison with the dangers which threatened us. A few hours before

AT THE BELLE IMAGE

it had seemed a great disaster; now it scarcely merited a second thought. For it was no longer a question of whether I should enter Poitiers in becoming state, but whether I should live to enter it at all. Besides, for some hours I had ceased to care as to the effect my appearance would have on either M. de Benseval or his daughter.

"Those roisterers seem harmless enough," said M. le Comte after a moment. "It was foolish to run away. If I had stayed to broach a cask of wine for them they would have drunk my health and marched away shouting 'God and the King!' with the best of us. They are Revolutionists merely for the excitement of it, not because they bear me ill-will."

"Those around the fire perhaps," assented Pasdeloup, "but not those others;" and he indicated with his finger a small group which stood motionless in the shadow of the tower almost directly beneath us. We leaned over the parapet and looked down at them. The rays of the fire glinted on knives, muskets, pistols. They were fully armed, though they wore no uniform.

"Who are they?" asked M. le Comte.

"Goujon brought them from Paris with him, monsieur. Look again and you will see their red caps. They are heroes of the September massacres."

I shivered at the words.

"Goujon wished to have at hand some one upon whom he could rely," Pasdeloup added quietly.

"He promised them that he would have agreeable

THE PATH OF HONOR

work for them, and that they should be well repaid, or they would never have consented to leave Paris."

"What are they doing down yonder?"

"They are watching the door to the tower."

"Well, let them watch it. We shall not open it, and they can never break it down."

"I would not be too certain of that, monsieur," said Padeloup, gloomily. "They have learned many things at Paris. Goujon boasted that even unarmed the people had taken a great prison called the Bastille—but most probably he was lying."

"No," said his master in a low tone, "in that particular, at least, he spoke the truth. But miracles do not repeat themselves."

"They no doubt have other means at command," responded Padeloup grimly, "without calling in the aid of the good God."

"No doubt they have," agreed his master; "but at least we can reduce the number of these assassins;" and he drew his pistols.

But Padeloup laid a warning hand upon his arm.

"Not yet, monsieur," he said. "I may be mistaken. Perhaps there is yet a chance. Perhaps those others will refuse to join them. Perhaps they will grow weary after a time and depart for home, content with such plunder as they can carry away. But if we begin the attack they will be on fire in a moment."

"You are right," agreed M. le Comte, and slowly returned his pistols to his belt. "Let us

AT THE BELLE IMAGE

wait, then. Meanwhile Pasdeloup, do you tell us how you came to know so well what Goujon was planning—and more especially why, since you did know it, you did not give me warning.”

Pasdeloup hesitated a moment.

“I will tell you, monsieur,” he said at last, “and you will see that I am not to blame—that I did what I could. You perhaps know the inn of the Belle Image at Dange?”

“I have heard of it.”

“I was there one evening a week ago drinking a glass of wine during an hour Laroche had taken my place at the gate. It was the first time he had ever proposed such a thing, but that night he came to me and told me of the wonderful new wine at the Belle Image, so good and so cheap, since it no longer had to pay tithes to the church and to the aristocrats. He ended by saying that as he was idle for an hour he would take my place at the gate while I went to the Belle Image and tasted the wine. I confess I was surprised; he saw it and explained that he wanted me to test for myself one of the benefits the Republic had conferred upon the people. So I went. I saw afterward that that was not his purpose at all.”

“I can guess what his purpose was,” said M. le Comte; “but continue your story.”

“I was, as I have said, drinking my wine,” continued Pasdeloup, “which was truly of a surprising excellence, when a man came and sat down beside me. For a moment I did not know him; then I saw it was Goujon. He greeted me with a kind-

THE PATH OF HONOR

ness which surprised me when I remembered that it was I who had helped to capture him; but he seemed to have forgotten that. I saw that he was well dressed and that his hands were white. He ordered a bottle of wine even superior to that which I was drinking, invited me to join him, and began to tell me of the wonderful events which were happening in Paris—events which would end by making us all free, and rich, and happy. He said that the aristocrats and the priests had been starving and robbing and killing us for five hundred years, and that now it was our turn.

“‘You remember that your own mother was starved to death, Pasdeloup,’ he said.

“‘Yes,’ I said, ‘I remember that.’

“‘Although enough to feed a hundred people was wasted every day at the château.’

“‘Yes,’ I agreed, ‘perhaps that is true.’

“‘You know how she would have been beaten had it been known that she stole even a morsel of food from the pigs.’

“‘Yes,’ I said again; ‘I know that.’

“‘You may perhaps remember,’ he went on, with a frightful contortion of the countenance, ‘the punishment I suffered for trapping a hare.’

“‘Yes,’ I said, ‘I remember.’

“‘And do you think it just, good God!’ he cried, ‘that a man should suffer like that for a fault so trivial? Yet that is what was happening day by day all over this broad land of France! What could we do? They took our grain for their bread, our flocks for their meat, our daughters

AT THE BELLE IMAGE

for their pleasure. Did we so much as protest we were hanged on the nearest gallows as a warning to others not to lift their heads. We might live or die, starve or rot—what did it matter! We were less to them, as you have seen, than the swine in their pens!’ I do not know,” added Pасdeloup, in another tone, “whether all of this was true, but it had a certain air of truth about it.”

“Most of it was true, I fear,” said M. le Comte in a low voice, “though I had never looked at it in quite that way.”

“There is a great difference, is there not, monsieur,” asked Pасdeloup, “in whether one looks at a thing from above or from below?”

“Yes,” agreed his master still more quietly, “there is.”

“At any rate,” continued Pасdeloup, “Goujon grew more and more excited with each word he uttered. ‘Why is it,’ he demanded, ‘that some people wear lace and jewels and others only rags? Why should a noble’s pigs be treated better than his peasants? Why should the peasants toil from year to year in order that the priests and the aristocrats may live in idleness with their women, and have fine wines to drink, and fine clothes to wear, and great houses to shelter them, while we who make the wine, and spin the cloth, and build the houses, have only swill and rags and hovels? Why should they be warm in winter and we cold? Why should we permit their game to destroy our crops without being permitted to raise a hand to prevent it?’

THE PATH OF HONOR

“‘I do not know,’ I answered, ‘except that it was always so.’

“‘Well, it will be so no longer!’ he cried. ‘We are going to change all that. We are going to reverse things. Monsieur Veto has already sneezed in the sack; the Austrian woman and her whelp will follow him.’

“‘And what then?’ I asked.

“‘Then we shall be free. Then we shall set about the work of establishing liberty, equality, fraternity. But first we will stuff the nobles’ mouths with dust, just as those good fellows at Paris stuffed old Foulon’s with hay. Come, you must join us, Padeloup. You also have wrongs to avenge.’

“‘I will think of it,’ I said, and returned to my post at the gate.

“All that night I lay and thought of what Goujon had said, and I confess, M. le Comte, that it appeared to me reasonable. So long as I had imagined that things were as they were because the good God so willed it, I had not questioned them. But now I began to suspect that perhaps the good God had no hand in them at all, and that the only thing left for us was to do what we could to help ourselves. The next night I inquired for Laroche, but no one had seen him; so leaving the gate open—the first time that I had ever done so—I hastened to the Belle Image. Goujon was awaiting me; again he bought wine, and again he laid before me the wrongs of the peasantry. At last I told him that I would join

AT THE BELLE IMAGE

the society which he was organizing at Dange. It was not until I had taken the oath that I discovered what it was he intended to do. He thought me wholly his, and indeed, from night to night, he convinced me more and more that justice was on our side.

"Two nights ago he was for some reason very jubilant and drank more than usual. It was at that time that he confided to me his passion for madame; that he told me what it was he had been doing in that attic at the moment you discovered him. Then he passed on to the plan he had in mind.

" 'We have all the servants now, Padeloup,' he said; 'even the women. Those we could not persuade we bribed; those we could not bribe we frightened into joining us. The plans are made, everything is ready. Your part will be to open the gates for us.'

" 'Which gates?' I asked.

" 'The gates of the château, of course.'

" 'Of the château?'

" 'Certainly, it is of the château I am speaking. We are going to attack it.'

" 'But M. le Comte is not there,' I protested.

" 'No,' said Goujon with a triumphant smile, 'nor will he ever again be there. I have attended to that. Laroche has lured him into our hands. First I will bring him here in order that he may witness my revenge—my triumph; then I will send him on to Paris to celebrate his nuptials with Madame Guillotine.'

THE PATH OF HONOR

"Then I saw the trap into which I had thrust my foot. As he sat there leering at me I was tempted to bury my knife in his belly; but I managed to control myself. It might be that there were other things which I should know.

" 'Well, then,' I said, 'since you already have him why attack the château?'

"The leer on his face grew broader.

" 'You forget, Padeloup,' he said, 'that the women are there.'

" 'What then?'

" 'What then? head of a pig! You are stupid to-night! Do you suppose I have forgotten? You do not know the sleepless nights I have spent tossing on my bed, biting my pillow at thought of what should one day be mine! Well, my day has come—that woman is going to be mine now—that is the triumph which Favras is to witness. Will it not be a pretty revenge? Could you think of anything prettier?' and he leered at me again and licked his lips with a tongue which seemed strangely red and swollen. 'You shall have the other; she shall be your reward—and *pardieu!* it is not to be laughed at. You do not know, Padeloup, what soft, white skins these *ci-devant* women have!'

I felt my blood grow suddenly hot with rage and a glance at M. le Comte's white face told me the agony he was suffering at the thought that his wife had been profaned by even the glances of this scoundrel.

"Go on," he said hoarsely. "And then?"

AT THE BELLE IMAGE

"Perhaps something in my face betrayed me," Padeloup continued. "At any rate, Goujon suddenly looked at me, then straightened back in his chair.

"'I have been talking nonsense, Padeloup,' he said. 'I have taken too much wine. I am always saying absurd things when I am drunk. You must forget that foolishness.'

"He said it so naturally that I believed him, more especially since at the moment his head was wobbling so that he could scarcely keep it off the table. But when I reached the château again I found that my zeal for the Revolution had vanished, since, even drunk, one of its leaders could propose such horrible things. Last night I remained at my post at the gate; but to-night an uneasiness seized me. I fancied that I detected some sort of understanding among the other servants. At the first moment I slipped away to Dange to learn the truth. There I found that a detachment of the Blues had just come in by post and had been ordered forward at once to surround the château. All of that rabble yonder had gathered in the square and Goujon was addressing them. The terrible things he was saying made me tremble. But I listened only for a moment. Then I hastened back to give you warning and found that I was already too late. That is all, M. le Comte."

His master laid a friendly hand upon his shoulder.

"I thank thee, Padeloup," he said. "What-

THE PATH OF HONOR

ever the event, thou hast done thy best. Thou hast paid thy debt a hundred fold."

A sudden frenzied outburst of yells interrupted him. We looked down again and saw a procession emerging from the house upon the terrace. Before them they were rolling five or six casks of wine and spirits.

"We shall see now," said Padeloup grimly, "how many of them will shout, 'God and the King!'"

CHAPTER XII.

MADNESS BECOMES FRENZY.

IN a moment the casks were broached, and the liquor, in whatever receptacles were at hand, was passed around from mouth to eager mouth. No one made the slightest attempt to husband it, and it was soon pouring down over the steps in little purple rivulets. The faces of the crowd, as the flaring torches and dancing flames revealed them, became more and more inhuman, their shouts hoarser and more menacing, their actions more and more bestial, until I felt my cheeks grow hot at the thought that these creatures belonged to humankind. Truly long centuries in the darkness had rendered them unfit for the light! If vermin such as this was to govern France, then France would better far be sunk in the ocean!

Drunken couples reeled hither and thither shouting incoherently; women forgetting their sex pursued such men as made a pretense of escaping and dragged them down into the shadows; a half-naked girl mounted astride a cask shouted obscenities at six or eight scoundrels who were going through the pretense of a mass.

"The Goddess of Reason!" said M. le Comte, his eyes dwelling upon this group; and indeed at that moment, as the wretch who played the priest made as though he were elevating the host, those behind him burst forth in a hoarse shout:

THE PATH OF HONOR

"Long live Reason! Long live Reason!"

Sick with disgust I glanced at the heavens, wondering that God did not blast them with his thunderbolts.

"I never thought such vileness could exist," I murmured; and Padeloup, who heard the words, smiled grimly.

"Do not blame them too bitterly, monsieur," he said. "How does it happen that they are what they are? What have they to thank God for? Why should they be grateful to the church? All their lives they have known only cruelty and injustice. Now it is their turn."

"That is true," I agreed; and suddenly I realized that this rude and ignorant peasant had a broader and truer outlook upon life than I. And I think that that moment saw the birth in me of a new tolerance and sympathy. At least I hope it did!

No thunderbolt came. Perhaps God, too, was looking down more in pity than in anger.

Attracted by the shout others of the crowd joined the group before the steps, drank of the wine which the girl passed down to them, and began a crazed Bacchanal dance before her. Then a red-faced rogue dashed up the steps to her and screaming with laughter tore her few remaining clothes from her back.

"Long live Reason!" he shouted. "I baptise thee!" and he dashed a cup of wine over her glistening skin.

Another snatched a twig from a flowering shrub

MADNESS BECOMES FRENZY

and bending it into the semblance of a wreath placed it upon her head.

"Long live Reason!" he shouted in his turn. But a woman in the crowd, jealous perhaps of the attentions shown the naked hussy, suddenly caught up a clod of earth and dashed it into her face; whereupon the goddess dismounted from her throne, vomiting forth I know not what villainess, was caught up by the crowd and passed from sight.

Then one of their number mounted the steps and began to harangue them. I could catch only a word here and there, yet it was easy enough to guess, from the frantic shouts which interrupted him, what his subject was. The mob was in a mood for any atrocity. It needed only the application of the spark.

M. le Comte's face grew grave as he gazed down at them.

"That is serious!" he said. "When they begin to speechify it is time to think of escape. Have you anything to suggest, Tavernay?"

"If we could reach the ground on the side of the tower away from the mob," I said, "we might escape into the wood, since there seems to be no watch of any kind, nor any one to intercept us."

"Yes, but to reach the ground—we need a rope."

"Is there none in the tower? Surely we can find something——"

THE PATH OF HONOR

"At least, we can look," he said, and led the way to the stair.

I followed him, but Padeloup, his arms folded, his head sunk in reverie, kept his place at the battlement, staring moodily down at the drunken revel.

We descended to the floor below where Padeloup's candle was still burning. A glance at it showed me that it had been half consumed. An hour more and we should be in darkness—if indeed we had not entered the eternal darkness long ere that!

In the first moment I thought the room was empty; then I saw madame half-sitting, half-lying on a couch in one corner, holding the younger woman in her arms. As we approached she raised a warning finger to her lips, and I saw with a sudden burst of tenderness that Charlotte had fallen asleep.

"Do not disturb her," warned madame in a low voice; but at that instant the sleeper opened her eyes.

For a moment she stared up at us blankly; then her eyes met mine and a wave of crimson swept from brow to chin.

"I have been asleep," she said, sitting hastily erect. "In spite of all my boasting," she added, smiling up at me.

"Yes," said M. le Comte; "and you should be proud of your steady nerves and clear conscience, my dear. Not many of us are able to sleep so peacefully in the face of danger."

MADNESS BECOMES FRENZY

"Danger?" she repeated, and looked about her.
"Has it come, then?"

"Oh, not a pressing danger," he assured her.
"Still, we must devise some means of escape before it becomes so. We shall have to take the light, I fear."

"Do so," said madame promptly. "Charlotte and I will ascend to the platform."

"It is not a pleasant sight that you will see," said M. le Comte, "nor pleasant words that you will hear——"

"We are not children," broke in madame.
"Come, Charlotte."

M. le Comte lighted them up the stair and then turned back to me.

"It is evident there is no rope here," he said, holding the candle above his head and looking about the apartment. "The old furnishings hang together better than one would think," he added.

It was not until then—so occupied had my mind been with other matters—that I perceived with what sumptuousness the place was fitted up. The tapestries were faded and dusty, the coverings of the furniture moth-eaten and decayed, and the room itself cobwebbed and moldy—but it was impressive, nevertheless. It was of good size, octagonal, conforming in shape to the tower, and in four of the sides small, shuttered windows were set. Tapestries and furniture alike had evidently been of the most costly and elegant description.

"This was the boudoir of the fair Gabrielle," observed M. le Comte, looking about him with a

THE PATH OF HONOR

smile. "It has been years since I set foot here and I had forgotten how it looked. You will see that with my ancestor it was a real passion; he did not spare himself. In fact I should hate to confess how much, first and last, she cost his family. Below is her bedchamber."

We went down the stair into another room even more luxuriously furnished. The great bed stood at one side with curtains drawn. One almost expected to see a small hand pluck them aside and to hear a shrill voice demand the meaning of our intrusion, or to be suddenly confronted by that old gallant Favras, oath on lip and sword in hand. Here there were no windows, only narrow slits sufficient to admit air and light but not wide enough to permit of assault from without. We made a careful circuit of the apartment, but found nothing which could by any possibility serve as a rope.

"There is one more chance," said M. le Comte, and led the way to the bottom story.

This had been divided into two rooms, one a sort of vestibule into which the outer door opened and from which the stair ascended, and the other a store-room. The vestibule was quite empty, and the store-room contained nothing but a pile of rotting casks and broken bottles.

My companion looked at them with a whimsical countenance.

"The fair lady evidently did not lack refreshment," he said. "I would she had had the forethought to leave us a few bottles. I am afraid," he added, turning back to the vestibule, "that the

MADNESS BECOMES FRENZY

only possible exit for us is through that door. There are no windows in this story, nor in the one above. To jump from the third story is to tempt death—or at least a multitude of broken bones. For myself, I prefer to face the enemy.”

“We might make a rope from the tapestries,” I suggested.

“They are rotten with mildew,” he objected; and indeed when we tested them we found them ready to fall to pieces at a touch. “Our situation is not so desperate,” he continued, as we climbed slowly up the stair again. “They will have to starve us out, since they have no cannon with which to batter down the wall, and that will take two or three days at the least. Many things may happen in that time.”

But though he spoke hopefully, I fancied his voice did not ring quite true. When we reached the platform he blew out the candle, placed it carefully in a crevice of the wall, then went to his wife where she stood leaning against the parapet, put an arm about her and drew her to him.

“Well?” she asked, smiling up at him.

“We are not yet out of the woods,” he said; “but, as I have just told Tavernay, there is no pressing danger. They will have to besiege us in form. Perhaps we may yet catch them napping.”

I had approached Mlle. de Chambray, drawn by an irresistible attraction—which indeed I made no effort to resist.

“What is your opinion, M. de Tavernay?” she asked, as I leaned against the wall beside her.

THE PATH OF HONOR

"I confess," I answered gloomily, "that I see little hope of escape, unless we can sprout wings and fly away. For you, mademoiselle, that would not be so great a miracle; but I fear I am too far below the angels to hope for such deliverance."

"It is not the angels alone who have wings," she retorted, her face lighting with a smile. "I have heard of other spirits similarly equipped."

"It may be that I do not resemble them either, mademoiselle," I ventured mildly.

"Who can tell!" she retorted; and turned away from me to gaze at the scene below.

The wine had done its work—had converted harmless peasants and cowering wretches into bloodthirsty brutes animated by a kind of frenzy which we for a moment did not understand. Men and women were running about screaming madly, no longer heeding the fire which they had kindled on the lawn, and which was now dying away for lack of fuel. They were pouring in and out of the house with some other end in view—and suddenly we saw what it was.

For from one wing of the château came a puff of smoke followed almost instantly by a quick burst of flame.

"They have fired the house," said M. le Comte grimly; and we stood there numbly watching the progress of the flames, as powerless to check them as though we had been a hundred leagues away.

They ate their way through the building with a rapidity which showed how artfully they were being fed. Indeed it seemed to me that this whole drama was moving forward to its climax with a

MADNESS BECOMES FRENZY

regularity which proved its prearrangement. It was not a spontaneous outburst of the people; it was a thing theatric, carefully thought out, in which the actors were really only puppets controlled by wires centring in one powerful hand. And as I recalled Padeloup's story there could be no question in my mind as to whom that hand belonged. I shivered a little as I asked myself what the crisis was toward which the drama was mounting. And I felt strangely impotent, as though it were the very hand of Fate raised against us, and not merely that of a vengeful and lecherous scoundrel!

The flames burst out at last at roof and windows, casting a red glow over lawn and garden, where the mob stood staring in half-awed triumph at its handiwork. Madame watched the destruction with white face, but with an admirable control.

"Can they fire the tower?" she asked.

"No, I think not," answered her husband. "Fire from without would have no effect upon these solid walls, and they cannot get fire to the inside. The breeze, you see, is carrying those sparks away from us."

"That was my home," she murmured, "and I loved it."

"We will build another," said M. le Comte, pressing her to him. "When this cloud that covers France has rolled away we will build another home, which you will love even more, for we shall be very happy there."

THE PATH OF HONOR

"Not happier than we have been here," she said, with a smile full at the same time of tears and joy. "We have been very happy here, my love. Whatever they do, they cannot take the past away from us. The future belongs to God, but the past is ours."

I looked away from them with tear-dimmed eyes down at that mob of savages. She had spoken truly—after all, their power for evil was limited to that: they could destroy the future, but they could not touch the past. And I remembered that I also had a past which was very sweet—a past not long as men count time, spanning indeed but a few short hours—and yet to memory an eternity!

"What are those men about?" asked a voice at my elbow, and Mlle. de Chambray pointed down at a group which had drawn a little apart from the rest.

They stood near the foot of the tower and seemed to be staring up at us, though in the darkness I could not be certain. Suddenly one of them whirled about his head some object which burst into a ring of flame. Then he hurled it up toward us.

"The fools!" said M. le Comte, with a laugh, "what can they hope to accomplish?"

As though in answer to the words there came from beneath our feet a rending crash, a sharp report, and a stream of acrid smoke poured up the stairway from the room below.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE UNFOLDING OF THE DRAMA.

INSTINCTIVELY I had caught my companion to me to shield her from the shock, and we stood an instant so with bated breath. Then a fierce chorus of exulting yells startled us back to action.

"A grenade!" cried M. le Comte, and started for the stair.

But Padeloup hurled himself before him down the stair, through that choking cloud of smoke. We were at his heels, and when we reached the floor below I saw him tearing down the tinder-dry tapestry, which was blazing fiercely. In a moment we had stamped out the flames upon the torn and splintered floor.

"They must not do that a second time," said M. le Comte when the danger was past. "I thought the windows were shuttered."

Padeloup went quickly to the window through which the bomb had come.

"This shutter is swinging loose," he said, and leaned coolly out to secure it.

A chorus of hoarse yells greeted him and a spatter of musket shots. I heard the bullets clipping the stones about him; but he heeded them not at all and pulled the heavy shutter into place and secured it with careful deliberation.

"We must look to the others," he said calmly when that was done, and himself made the circuit

THE PATH OF HONOR

of the other windows to assure himself that the shutters were in place.

"Bring down the candle, Tavernay," said M. le Comte. "We must see what damage has been done here."

Not until it blazed up from the spark which Padeloup struck into it did I suspect that he was injured. Then, as the flame burned clearly, I perceived a smear of blood across his face.

"Not wounded, Padeloup?" cried M. le Comte, whose eyes had been caught by the same red stain.

"Only a scratch, monsieur," Padeloup replied; but his master was not satisfied until he had wiped away the blood and assured himself that the wound was indeed a slight one. A bullet had grazed Padeloup's forehead, cutting in the skin a clean furrow which was bleeding copiously. Padeloup submitted to this inspection with evident impatience.

"It is nothing," he repeated. "It is nothing. You are wasting time, monsieur."

"All right, my friend," said his master, releasing him at last, "but I wanted to be quite sure;" and he turned to an inspection of the room.

It was sadly wrecked, the furniture blown asunder, the tapestries smoking on the splintered floor; but the walls were intact, impregnable. M. le Comte smiled as he looked at them.

"As well assault a lion with pebbles as this tower with hand-grenades," he said. "We are safe as ever."

THE UNFOLDING OF THE DRAMA

"Except in one particular, monsieur," broke in Padeloup in a low voice. "They are now quite certain that we have taken refuge here. Before, perhaps, they only suspected it."

"That is true," agreed his master thoughtfully. "Well, let us see what the next move will be;" and he blew out the candle and mounted to the platform. "Everything is safe," he added, in answer to madame's look, and joined her at the parapet.

As for me, I boldly took the place I coveted beside the younger woman.

"It reminds one of Rome burning," I said, gazing down at the flames and the frenzied multitude. "I might almost fancy myself a second Nero—you perceive that the populace is cursing us."

"Yes," she retorted without raising her eyes, "and no doubt, like Nero, you would fiddle in the face of those curses."

"There are moments," I said, "when joy of heart enables one to smile at any misfortune."

"You are experiencing such a moment now? You are fortunate!"

"I am, indeed. Perhaps Nero also had the woman he loved beside him."

"That would be an explanation, truly!"

"But one thing I am quite certain he did not have," I added in a lower tone, bending above her. "He did not have, warm against his heart, a flower which his love had kissed and thrown to him."

"We all of us have our foolish impulses," she

THE PATH OF HONOR

responded tartly; but I saw the glow which deepened in her cheek.

"If that was a foolish impulse, mademoiselle," I said, "I trust it will not be the last one. But it was not mere impulse—it came from your heart. One day you are going to love me."

"Well, and what then?" she questioned quietly.

I confess I had no answer ready; what answer was it possible to give?

"I may add, M. de Tavernay," she continued more severely, "that I consider your jests exceedingly ill-timed. Why talk of a future which will never exist?"

"But it will exist!" I protested.

"Then no doubt you have already devised a way of escape from this tower. It is only necessary for us to depart whenever we are ready."

"No, mademoiselle," I said; "I see no way of escape at present; but I trust my star."

"Your star?"

"Yes; it has never yet failed me. To-day—or rather yesterday—after apparently plunging me into the depths of an abyss it drew me forth and led me straight to you."

"And to this trap."

"Ah, mademoiselle; beside the other, that does not matter!"

She turned from me with a gesture of impatience.

"Your mind travels always in a circle."

"Of which you are the centre, mademoiselle. What other figure could my mind describe, revolving as it does about you?"

THE UNFOLDING OF THE DRAMA

"You have an answer always ready," she retorted; "nevertheless I think your star would have done better by you had it permitted you to continue your journey to Poitiers unmolested. You would have arrived there with a free heart, ready to fulfil your oath to your father; you would have had no temptation to forget your honor; your life would have been calm and happy."

"The life of an ox would answer that description," I answered. "Yet I am very far from envying the ox."

"And there you are wrong. Besides, I have still to add that as it stands you have no future before you. You have come to the end of the path."

"So much the better," I said, drawing nearer to her. "Since there is no future, let us love each other. Let us approach the end heart against heart."

She did not answer, only stared moodily down over the parapet. The château was wholly given over to the flames. They burst from every window; they roared above the roof, and their scorching breath caused us to shrink back a little.

"It is heart-breaking!" she cried, shielding her face with her hand; and I saw that there were tears in her eyes. "That beautiful home! Ah, those wretches will be punished!"

"What would you do with them, mademoiselle?" I asked.

"I would hang them every one. Men and women alike. Men and women—beasts!"

And as I noted the sudden clenching of her

THE PATH OF HONOR

hands and flashing of her eyes, I could not but wonder at the complexities of woman's nature.

"Let us not look at them," I said. "Let us forget that they exist. Let us remember only that we are here together and that there is no future. Let us sit down here in the shadow of the wall and imagine that we are again in the garden."

"My imagination cannot touch such heroic heights, M. de Tavernay. In the garden, I was happy, or nearly so——"

"You confess it, then?" I broke in eagerly; but she stopped me with a gesture.

"I have always been happy—at least until the past few days. And in the garden I fancied that even the little cloud which seemed to shadow me would disappear. Now, on the contrary, I am far from happy."

"You are at least no coward," I said. "You are not afraid."

"No, I am not afraid. It is the sense of helplessness which weighs upon me and angers me. I have always ordered my life to suit myself; I have always had control of the circumstances which concerned me. Yet here I am now, caught like a rat in a trap. I can break my teeth against the bars, and all in vain. I must wait for some miracle to deliver me, and not only myself but my dearest friends. Meanwhile their home, their beautiful home, is burned before my eyes, and I must look on helpless while a mob of drunken brutes rejoices in its destruction. I know that no

THE UNFOLDING OF THE DRAMA

miracle can restore it. And yet, M. de Tavernay, you ask me to fancy myself in some fool's paradise!"

"It was a paradise," I agreed; "whether a fool's or a wise man's does not matter. Paradise is always paradise."

"Not for the onlookers!" she retorted.

"But what need those within care for those without? Ah, I understand—you class yourself as an onlooker. You have not love to work the alchemy for you," I added sadly.

She looked up at me slowly with luminous eyes.

"Perhaps you are right," she said. "I have never been really within the pale. I have always stood outside, peering in, wondering why others thought it so beautiful."

I know not what folly I was about to utter, when a sudden tremendous crash sounded behind me.

"The roof has fallen in," said M. le Comte quietly, as we rushed to the parapet. "That is the end of it."

The flames leaped high into the air with a roar like the passing of a mighty wind over a great forest. The mob seemed for the moment to have forgotten us in the grandeur of that spectacle; but always at the foot of the tower that little group of armed men stood apart.

The sudden burst of light threw their faces into strong relief, and Padeloup, who had been staring down at them, uttered a sharp cry.

"He is there!" he said. "He is there!"

THE PATH OF HONOR

"Who is there, Padeloup?" demanded his master.

"Goujon! See!—that one with the cloak about him—there at the right!"

Quick as a flash M. le Comte snatched out his pistol, levelled it and fired. There was a cry of pain from below and a man fell—but it was not Goujon. M. le Comte put up his pistol with an oath of anger and disappointment.

But hell itself had broken loose and such a fusillade of bullets rained against the tower that we were forced to retire from the parapet. All the fury of the ages seemed whirled upon us; all the blind madness which centuries of oppression and injustice had engendered. Those of the mob who were unarmed danced shrieking about the tower, shaking their fists at it, or assailed the great stones with their nails. It seemed that the very uproar was enough to shake it from its foundation.

"That was not wise," said Padeloup gloomily. "It was the one thing Goujon needed."

"I know it!" confessed his master, and wiped his forehead with a shaking hand. "Yet I would have risked it gladly had I only killed that scoundrel. I must kill him—I must kill him. I could not rest in my grave with him alive!"

"Who is it?" asked madame. "Who is it that you wish to kill?"

"The scoundrel who set these peasants on."

"Who seeks your life?"

"Oh, more than my life, madame!" he answered

THE UNFOLDING OF THE DRAMA

hoarsely. "More than my life! I could forgive him that!"

For a moment she stared at him, not understanding. Then her face went white with horror and she put out a hand for support.

"It cannot come to that!" she murmured. "At least we will not let it come to that!"

"No," he said, and drew her to him. "Do not fear, my love. It shall never come to that!"

The firing had slackened and at last we ventured to look down again. The mob had drawn away from the tower and had gathered into little groups, staring up at it.

"It is to be a siege," said M. le Comte, laughing grimly. "If we were only provisioned we might hold out indefinitely—and these rogues have little patience."

But Padeloup shook his head.

"You do not know them, monsieur," he said. "They have patience enough. But it is not a siege they are planning—it is an assault—I am sure of it."

"Well, let them plan," retorted his master. "Let them assault. Much good will it do them!"

"No doubt," said Padeloup quietly, "the governor of the Bastille uttered the same words when he looked down at the unarmed mob of Paris from the battlement of his prison."

"You are right, my friend," agreed M. le Comte gently. "He did not understand the power of the people. But I, who have been in

THE PATH OF HONOR

La Vendée, should know better. You think we are in danger, then?"

"Beyond question," answered Padeloup. "And I am glad that it is so—that there will be no siege. Since there is no succor for us anywhere, we must in the end either starve or surrender. For myself I prefer a short, sharp fight, with death at the end of it."

"And I," I said.

"For myself I can say the same," agreed M. le Comte. "But for the women!" and he glanced toward where they stood, sheltered by the parapet.

"For the women," said Padeloup grimly, "the last bullets must be saved."

"There is nothing, then, but to remain here and be murdered?" demanded his master. "You believe that, Padeloup?"

"Not in the least, monsieur," answered the other cheerfully. "We shall first make every effort to escape."

"But how?"

"I must consider it," said Padeloup, with a self-assurance which at another time would have been amusing. "There is no time to be lost;" and he disappeared down the stair leading to the floor below.

My companion looked after him musingly.

"Ah, Tavernay," he said, "I am beginning to suspect that there are depths in these peasants of which we never dreamed. I have seen them fight like heroes, and I had always thought them cowards. Here to-night I have seen one stand

THE UNFOLDING OF THE DRAMA

erect, a man, and I had fancied that they could only crawl. When France wins through this peril and shakes off this madness which has her by the throat, there will be such a searching of hearts as the world has never seen!"

A sudden stillness had fallen upon the mob below; no sound rose to the platform save the crackling of the flames. We looked down to see what this strange silence meant, and found that the little groups of people had drawn still farther away from the tower and were watching it with a kind of awed expectancy. Their silence was infinitely more sinister than their shouting. There was something about it—something horrible and threatening—which sent a chill to the marrow. Why should they stand there staring at the tower? What frightful thing was about to happen?

My companion evidently felt the same foreboding, for he gazed down at them with drawn brows.

"What do they mean?" he muttered. "What do they mean?"

He stared a moment longer, then turned to his wife.

"Come hither, my love," he said, and when she came, drew her to him and held her close.

My heart was full to bursting. In an instant I was beside Charlotte.

"My love!" I said softly, and held out my arms to her.

"What is it?" she whispered. "Oh, what is it?"

THE PATH OF HONOR

"I do not know. They are preparing something, awaiting something. It is the end perhaps."

"The end!" she echoed hoarsely. "The end!" and she stared up into my eyes, her lips trembling.

"And if it were," I questioned gently, "would you not wish to meet it with my arms about you? Oh, they are longing for you!"

She did not answer, but I fancied she swayed toward me.

In an instant she was close against my heart—close against my heart!

"Since this is the end," I said softly, "since there is no future, you are going to love me, are you not, Charlotte? And there is a future! In a moment more nothing can ever part us—your soul and mine! Look at me, my love!"

The tears were streaming down her face as she lifted it to mine.

"Kiss me!" she whispered. "Kiss me!"

I bent and kissed her and felt her warm lips answer. Oh, now I could smile in the very face of death!

"I love you!" I murmured, my pulses bounding wildly. "I love you!—love you!—love you! Now and always, I love you!—for life or death!——"

A deep roar burst upon the night, a sheet of livid flame leaped upward toward us, and the tower swayed and trembled as though smitten by some mighty hand.



A SHEET OF LIVID FLAME LEAPED UPWARD TOWARD US, AND
THE TOWER SWAYED



CHAPTER XIV.

A BETTER MAN THAN I.

I OPENED my eyes to find the tower still standing and my love clinging to me; her face tear-stained and white.

"We are safe!" she cried. "We are safe! It was not the end!"

Then the bonds of bewilderment were struck away, for the mob with a wild yell charged toward the tower as one man.

"A mine!" cried M. le Comte. "A mine!" And putting his wife gently from him, he hurled himself toward the stair.

Blindly I bent and kissed the red lips still raised to mine, put away the clinging hands—with what aching of the heart may be imagined—and followed M. le Comte without daring to look back. Down we flew, half smothered by the fumes of sulphur and clouds of dust—down into that black pit which yawned to swallow us—one flight, two—then M. le Comte held me back.

"Wait," he said—"wait;" and he descended cautiously some few steps. He was back beside me in a moment. "They have made a breach," he said. "I could see the glint of their torches through it. But they must clear away the debris before they can enter. We have perhaps five minutes."

THE PATH OF HONOR

"We can hold the stair," I said. "It is steep and narrow. Two swords can keep an army back."

"But once they gain entrance below us they can burn us out. No, we must escape, Tavernay—or make a dash for it. Better death by the sword than by fire."

"And the women?"

"For them," he said with set teeth, "the same death as for us—it is the only way. For me, my wife; for you, Charlotte. Are you brave enough to thrust your sword into her heart, my friend?"

A cold-sweat broke out upon me, head to foot.

"God in heaven, no!" I cried, hoarsely. "Not that—anything but that!"

"As for me," said my companion, with a terrible calmness, "I prefer to kill my wife rather than abandon her to the mercies of Goujon. Come, Tavernay, be a man! You love her and yet you hesitate!"

"Love her! Oh, God!" I groaned.

"Come! We have but a moment. They are almost through!" and indeed I could hear the frantic blows with which the debris was being swept aside, could see the reflection of the torches' glare. By a supreme effort I controlled the trembling which shook me.

"Very well, monsieur," I said, as calmly as I could, "I am ready. What is it you propose?"

By the dim glare of the torches I could see his white face poised like a phantom's in the air before me.

"Spoken like a man!" he said, and gripped my

A BETTER MAN THAN I

hand. "What I propose is this—we will hold this stair until they find they cannot carry it by assault; then, as they prepare their fire, we will ascend to the platform, bid the women good-by—God of Heaven!—what is that?"

I, too, heard the blood-curdling sound which came suddenly from one corner of the room. It was a sort of snarling whine, which rose and fell and rose again, mixed with a hideous panting which never stopped. There was something bestial about it—something appalling, inhuman—yet what beast could produce a sound like that?

Cautiously we approached the corner, sword in hand. Whatever it was, however formidable, we must have it out—we could run no risk of being taken in the rear. The great, draped bed loomed through the darkness, sinister and threatening. The sounds came from within it. As I stared with starting eyes I fancied I could see the curtains quiver, as though the Thing behind them was trembling with eagerness to spring upon us.

"A light! We must have a light!" cried M. le Comte, stamping his feet in an agony of impatience. "God's blood! What is it, Tavernay?"

Gripping my teeth to restrain their chattering, I advanced to the bed and jerked down the rotting curtains. They fell in a suffocating shower of dust; yet even then I could see nothing of what lay behind. But the noise had ceased.

Then suddenly beside me rose a phantom, which, even as I drew back my arm to strike, seized my wrist and held it in a grip of steel.

THE PATH OF HONOR

"Not so fast, monsieur," said a hoarse voice.

"Pasdeloup!" I cried. "Pasdeloup! Was it you, then?"

But Pasdeloup had already turned to his master.

"I have a rope, M. le Comte," he said simply.

"A rope! A rope! But where did you get it, Pasdeloup?"

"From the bed. Oh, I had trouble enough loosening those knots! They had been tightened by I know not what weight! The people who lay in that bed were giants! And at the end I thought it would be too late. But it is not—it is not! Come—there is yet a chance!"

He started for the stair, and at the same instant there came from below a crash of falling stone and a chorus of exultant yells.

"They have broken through!" said M. le Comte. "They will be upon us in a moment! Tavernay, to you I confide my wife, and to you, Pasdeloup! Hasten! Hasten! I will keep them back;" and he took his station at the stair-head.

Without a word Pasdeloup threw the rope to me, sprang to the corner where the bed stood, and with a single jerk ripped off one of the heavy posts, tipped with iron; then pushing his master aside, roughly and yet tenderly, he seized for himself the post of danger from which there could be no retreat.

"Go, messieurs!" he cried. "Go quickly! There is yet time!"

We stood uncertain. It seemed such a cowardly thing to run away, leaving this man to face that

A BETTER MAN THAN I

frenzied mob—to abandon him, to permit him to lay down his life for us—such a cowardly thing!

He glanced around to see us still standing there.

“Not gone!” he cried furiously. “Body of God! Are we all to die, then—and the women, too? Fools! Cowards!”

“He is right,” said M. le Comte hoarsely. “He is right, Tavernay—it is cowardice holds us here! We must go if we would save the women. Pasedeloup,” he said, “I thank thee. I honor thee. Thou art a better man than I!”

“Go, monsieur!—go!” urged Pasedeloup. “I am paying my debt. My life has been yours any time these twenty years. It is nothing. Go!”

Without a word, M. le Comte turned and started up the stair. I followed him, my eyes blurred with tears. And as we went we heard a rush of feet behind us, then a chorus of groans and yells which told us that the attack had begun and that Pasedeloup stood firm.

And M. le Comte’s words were ringing in my head.

Pasedeloup, Pasedeloup! A better man than I!
A better man than I!

CHAPTER XV.

THE END OF GABRIELLE'S TOWER.

Not until we had reached the platform and come out into the clear moonlight and the radiance of the glow cast by the flames was it possible for us to examine the rope and ascertain if Padeloup had really provided us with a means of escape. It was a cord, light, but of unusual strength, which had been passed from side to side of the bed to support the bedding, and was not rotted as I had feared. But it was too short—a glance told me that—too short by many feet to reach from the parapet to the ground.

“We must use one of the windows,” I said; and M. le Comte assented with a motion of the head.

I ran down to the floor below, and closing my ears as well as I could to the shrieks and curses of the mob which was struggling to force a passage of the stair, flung back the shutter of the window which looked out upon the wood opposite the château. Then cautiously I scanned the ground about the tower, but could see no evidence of any guard, nor any stragglers from the mob which was hurling itself on Padeloup. With a deep breath of relief I withdrew my head, and securing one end of the cord to the great hinge of the shutter, made a loop in the other.

At that instant M. le Comte came down the

THE END OF GABRIELLE'S TOWER

stair bringing the women with him. He noted my arrangements at a glance and approved them with a nod.

"Now, my love," he said; and madame came forward at once, pale, but holding herself admirably in hand.

By the moonlight which flooded the apartment through the open window I perceived, dark against her bosom, the handle of a dagger, and instantly I knew who had given it to her, and why.

"I am ready," she said, and lifted a radiant face to his.

I knew that she believed she was going to her death and was not afraid. They may rant about equality as they will, but after all blood will tell.

"Good!" he cried. "You are setting us all an example of courage. Sit here on the window-sill—so; now swing your feet over—so; now place them in this loop and grasp the rope tightly. Stay close by the tower until we descend. It will be but a moment. And now good-by, my love."

She bent and kissed him, then let herself slide slowly from the window-ledge while we braced ourselves for the shock. I could see the shudder which shook her as she whirled for a moment in mid-air. I saw her teeth sink into her lip to restrain the cry of terror which rose in her throat. Then she succeeded in steadying herself, and we lowered her hand over hand.

"God grant that she has not been seen!" murmured M. le Comte; and from my heart I echoed the prayer.

In a moment the rope slackened and we knew

THE PATH OF HONOR

that she had reached the ground. M. le Comte leaned out and looked down at her and waved his hand.

"She is safe," he said. "She has not been seen."

In a breath we had drawn the rope up again.

"Now, Charlotte," said M. le Comte; and I helped her to mount the window.

"Mademoiselle," I said hoarsely, "take this pistol. Conceal it somewhere in your gown; and if you are surprised, if you see there is no escape, use it."

For an instant she did not understand; then with a quick breath she held out her hand.

"Thank you," she said quietly. "I shall not forget;" and she thrust the weapon beneath her cloak.

"Good-by, my love!" I whispered; and with melting eyes she pressed her lips to mine. "My love! My love!"

She smiled at me tenderly; then she passed slowly downward, out of sight. A moment more and she, too, had reached the ground.

So concerned had we been in getting them safely down that neither of us had thought or ear for the tumult beneath our feet; but now, as we paused an instant to take breath, it seemed to me that it was mounting toward us.

"You next, M. le Comte," I said; "and do not wait for me. Get under cover of the wood, and I will join you—but do not wait too long."

He hesitated an instant, then sprang to the sill.

THE END OF GABRIELLE'S TOWER

"That is best," he assented. "We shall wait for you at the edge of the wood directly west of the tower. You cannot miss us. And we will wait until you come."

He gripped my hand, caught the rope, and disappeared from the window. At the same instant I turned and darted down the stair.

At every step the pandemonium below grew in volume until it seemed that all the fiends of hell were fighting there. The pungent smell of powder assailed my nostrils, and through the darkness I caught the flash of musket and pistol and the flare of torches. But with a gasp of relief I saw that the mob had not yet gained a foothold in the room.

I sprang to one side where an angle of the wall shielded me from the bullets, and paused to look about me. The air was thick with smoke; and not until I drew quite near could I perceive Padeloup's squat figure. He was standing at the head of the stair, a little to one side, his huge club raised in his hands. At that instant a shaggy head appeared and the club fell upon it, crushing it like a shell of glass. The body pitched forward quivering, and again Padeloup raised his club and waited, like the very god of death.

As I silently took my place beside him I perceived that the sounds from below were not all yells of rage and triumph; there were groans among them, and oaths, and screams of agony; and as the smoke lifted for an instant I saw that the stair was cumbered with bodies.

THE PATH OF HONOR

A sort of panic seized upon the mob as it discovered its own losses, and for a moment it drew back in terror before this mysterious and fearful weapon, which slew, and slew—silent, untiring. A sudden stillness fell upon them as they contemplated that bloody stair—a stillness broken only by those groans and curses. Then some one shouted a sharp command, and a cloud of black smoke puffed into our faces, and the odor of burning straw.

As I touched him on the arm, Padeloup, whose attention had been wholly concentrated on the stair, wheeled upon me, his club ready to strike.

"Come!" I shouted in his ear. "Come!" And I motioned to the stair behind us.

"M. le Comte," he demanded, "where is he?"

"He is safe," I answered. "So are the women. Save yourself!"

He glanced at the thickening smoke and sniffed the air with distended nostrils.

"They are going to burn us out," he said; and even as he spoke a tongue of yellow flame licked the bottom of the stair.

Then the wounded wretches stretched upon it understood the fate in store for them. Their shrieks redoubled; but now there were prayers mingled with the curses. My heart turned sick within me as I looked at them.

"Come!" I urged, and plucked at my companion's sleeve.

This time he nodded, and I sprang up the stair. He followed at my heels.

THE END OF GABRIELLE'S TOWER

"Here we are," I said, and paused at the open window.

He motioned me to precede him. I sprang to the sill, seized the cord and slid to the ground so rapidly that it burnt into my fingers; but I scarcely felt the pain. In a moment Padeloup stood beside me.

"This way," he said; and without an instant's hesitation led the way toward a thicket near the tower. We plunged into it without stopping to look back and pushed our way forward until we came to a little eminence bare of trees. Here we paused to take breath.

The dawn was just tinging the eastern sky, but across the cold, grey light there burst suddenly a mighty finger of flame. It was the tower, blazing like a monster torch; and I shuddered as I thought of the fate of the wretches who had perished there.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE TRAGEDY.

PASDELOUP did not so much as glance at the blazing tower. He was gazing at the woods about us, scanning each thicket with eyes preternaturally bright. It was still too dark for me to discern anything in the smudge of shadow beneath the trees, but my companion seemed to labor under no such disability. I knew of course that he was searching for some trace of his master.

"He said that he would wait for us at the edge of the wood," I told him, "straight westward from the tower."

"We came that way," said Padeloup gruffly. "It was there I thought to find him, but he was not there. I will go back again. Wait here for me."

In an instant he had disappeared beneath the trees so quietly that I did not hear so much as the rustle of a leaf. He melted into the forest; became a part of it.

I turned back to the tower and watched the flames as they leaped high in the heavens, as though striving to touch the stars, which faded and paled before the growing light in the east. Dawn was at hand, and I realized the folly of lingering there. That rope hanging from the window must be soon discovered—perhaps had

THE TRAGEDY

been discovered long ere this—and pursuit of course would follow instantly. And my heart suddenly chilled at the thought that perhaps M. le Comte and the women had walked straight into a trap which had been set for them.

The thought brought me to my feet, and I looked to right and left with an overpowering feeling of helplessness. At the first step I would be lost. And yet I could not stand idle——

A sudden vivid sense of companionship caused me to start around. It was Padeloup who had returned as noiselessly as he had gone.

“You found them?” I asked.

He shook his head and sank to a sitting posture, his brows knitted, his eyes staring straight before him. I burned to ask the direction of his search, the details of it, but something in his attitude warned me to hold my tongue. Then suddenly his face cleared and he sprang to his feet.

“Come,” he said, and set off down the hill at a pace which I found it hard to equal.

Once among the trees the going was still more difficult, but Padeloup sped forward with astonishing ease and swiftness and as silently as a shadow. As for myself, I floundered through the underbrush and over the uneven ground as best I could. But the best was bad enough, and more than once I fancied that Padeloup had abandoned me to my own resources, as I certainly deserved. But always I found him patiently awaiting me. He seemed to have some well-defined objective point in view, for he went straight forward with-

THE PATH OF HONOR

out looking to right or left. We came out at the end of half an hour into a gentle valley nearly free of trees, and up this he turned almost at a run. At last I panted after him up a little hill and found him calmly sitting at the top.

I flung myself beside him, breathless, utterly exhausted.

"Do not wait for me," I said, as soon as I could speak. "You must find them—they need you more than I. I will shift for myself."

"We stop here," he answered, still gruffly. "They must pass this way."

At last I was able to sit up and look about me. The hill on which we were stood at the junction of two little valleys.

"They must come by one of those," continued Padeloup. "We will wait until they pass."

"But why did they not wait for us in the wood?" I questioned. "Perhaps M. le Comte gave me up when I did not follow him."

"No," said Padeloup. "They waited, but they were discovered and forced to flee."

"Discovered?" I repeated despairingly.

"At least a body of peasants passed over the spot where they had stopped. Perhaps they were not seen."

I breathed again.

"And they will come this way?"

"They must, if they keep to the cover of the woods."

"They will, of course, do that," I said, and strained my eyes down each of the valleys in turn.

THE TRAGEDY

Our position commanded a considerable view of the surrounding country, but the château was hidden by a low spur of hill which ran down into the valley at our left. I fancied I could still see in the sky the reflection of the light from the burning tower, but a moment later I saw it was the sun just peeping over the trees to the east.

Then I began to chafe at the delay, for it seemed to me that we were wasting time. I glanced at my companion and found that apparently he had totally forgotten me.

"Pasdeloup," I said at last, "are you quite sure that M. le Comte must pass this hill?"

He looked up with a start and a frown.

"Yes," he answered harshly; and I saw that he himself was disturbed by the delay. "To north and south are only open fields where people are working, and many houses. He could not hope to pass that way unseen, especially with the women. He will know this. He will know that he must follow this valley to the west. In this way he can keep to the shelter of the hills until he reaches the valley of the Dive. Beyond that is the Bocage."

"Yes," I agreed; "it is the Bocage he will seek to reach. But perhaps he has already passed."

Pasdeloup shook his head.

"Impossible. We came by a shorter way which the women could not have followed. Besides, he said he would wait for you. It is that which is delaying him. He fancies you are lost somewhere in the woods down yonder. I shall have to

THE PATH OF HONOR

seek him;" and he rose to his feet with sudden resolution.

Then he stopped and stood for an instant staring down the valley.

"It is they!" he cried. "It is they!"

I sprang to my feet and followed with my eyes his pointing finger. For some moments I saw nothing—only the tangle of trees and underbrush; then I caught a movement among the trees and three figures came out into the little glade below us.

The women advanced slowly and with difficulty, as though already weary. M. le Comte paused to look back.

"You were right," I said, touched to the heart. "He is still seeking me." But Padeloup had placed his hand behind his ear and was listening intently, his face of a sudden rigid as stone.

"They have waited for you too long," he said roughly. "They are followed;" and he plunged down the hillside, I after him.

M. le Comte had given an arm to each of the women and was hurrying them forward, encouraging each in turn. Not until we were almost upon them did he hear us; then he snatched out his pistols and whirled toward us.

"M. le Comte!" I cried. "Madame!" But my eyes were only for that other face, gray and dreary in the cold light of the morning. She had been staring listlessly at the ground, but at sound of my voice she started round upon me, her face white as death.

"Tavernay!" cried M. le Comte, a great light

THE TRAGEDY

in his eyes. "And Padeloup! Ah, I understand now why you lingered!" and he held out a hand to each of us. "We thought you dead! We thought the flames had caught you!"

"Come," said Padeloup. "This is no time for words."

"You are right," agreed his master. "Tavernay, I again entrust Charlotte to you."

I crossed to her, took her hands in mine and drew her to me.

"I thought you dead," she murmured, raising brimming eyes to mine. "I thought you had stayed too long;" and I felt how she was trembling.

"Come!" cried Padeloup again; "there is a hiding-place, if we can only reach it;" and he glanced anxiously over his shoulder.

I drew my love forward, my arm still about her.

"We are going to escape," I murmured in her ear. "We are going to be very happy. God intends it."

She looked up into my eyes and smiled tremulously. I could guess how near she was to absolute exhaustion and did my best to shield her. Our way for a time led over a smooth meadow, then we plunged into the rocky bed of a brook which mounted so steeply that our progress was very slow. The way grew more and more rough, great boulders blocked the path, and on either side the banks of the torrent rose abruptly to a height of many feet.

Then, from far down the valley behind us, came the bay of a hound.

THE PATH OF HONOR

M. le Comte stopped and listened.

"I know that sound," he said. "That is Roland. What can he be hunting?"

"He is hunting his master," answered Padeloup grimly. "Goujon devised that trick."

"Goujon!" murmured M. le Comte. "Always Goujon."

"It was he trained the dog," added Padeloup. "Come; we are losing time."

"The women cannot go much farther along such a road as this," his master warned him.

"We have not far to go—just around that turn yonder, and we are safe."

Suddenly behind us rose a chorus of savage yells.

"They have seen us!" said M. le Comte.

I drew my companion to me and half carried her up the steep slope over which in rainy weather the torrent plunged. Padeloup had already reached the top. As I looked back I saw a mob of men clambering savagely over the rocks below. At that instant M. le Comte panted up with madame in his arms.

"There!" he said with a smile of triumph, as he placed her on her feet. "That is accomplished! For the moment we are safe. They will never dare——"

A single musket shot rang out. I saw the smoke drift slowly up, and at the same instant madame staggered and fell into her husband's outstretched arms.

"What is it?" he cried. "Oh, my love! My love!"



AS I LOOKED BACK I SAW A MOB OF MEN CLAMBERING SAV-
AGELY OVER THE ROCKS BELOW



THE TRAGEDY

Her eyes were open and she was gazing fondly up at him. She tried to speak, but could not. Her lips were flecked with blood. Then her eyes closed, her arm fell limp.

It had happened so suddenly that I could not realize it—could not believe it.

"Come," said Padeloup again, and touched his master's arm.

M. le Comte lifted to us a face convulsed.

"Go!" he said hoarsely. "Padeloup, I charge you with those two. Save them! I can hold this mob back."

Padeloup looked down at them. They were very near and climbing steadily upward. With a strength almost superhuman he caught up a huge boulder and sent it bounding toward them down the slope. They saw it coming and scattered; then, when a second followed it, fled wildly. Their advance had been checked for the moment.

Padeloup turned back to his master.

"Come," he said again.

M. le Comte laid his wife's body gently down and stood erect.

"I tell you I die here," he said, a great calmness in his eyes. "Will you obey me, or will you not? I command you to guide these two to the hiding-place you spoke of."

For an instant Padeloup's eyes blazed defiance; then he glanced down at the enemy, and his lips curved into a smile. He bent his head and set off up the stream.

"Follow him, Tavernay," commanded M. le

THE PATH OF HONOR

Comte, seeing that I hesitated. "I would not save my life if I could—it is loathsome to me. I commend Charlotte to you. Go straight west to the Bocage; there you will find friends. God bless you!"

"I cannot go," I faltered. "I cannot leave you here. That would be too cowardly!"

"Cowardly?" he echoed, facing around upon me. "It is I who have chosen the coward's part! To you I give a duty far more difficult. Ah, here they come!" he added, and raised his pistols. "Go—I beg of you. Be brave enough to go."

I could do nothing but obey—no other path lay open. With sinking heart I passed my arm again about the waist of my companion, who had seemingly lapsed into a sort of stupor, and followed Padeloup who was awaiting us impatiently at a little distance.

"This way," he said; and turned from the bed of the torrent up the steep hillside. I paused for one backward glance at the friend I had abandoned. He was standing erect, pistols in hand. The tears blinded me, and I hastened on.

In a moment Padeloup stopped.

"Do you see that ledge of rock up yonder overgrown with vines?" he asked. "Put the vines aside and you will find behind them a very comfortable cavern. Enter it and you are safe."

"And you?" I asked, seeing that he turned away.

"I? Oh, I return to my master;" and he was off in an instant.

THE TRAGEDY

I gazed after him, touched anew by that dog-like devotion, until he disappeared from sight down the bed of the torrent. In the distance I heard a rattle of muskets. They were attacking him, then; and I pictured to myself that gallant figure defying them, his eyes gleaming, a smile upon his lips. Ah, if I were only there beside him!

Then suddenly I became conscious of a dead weight on my arm, and glanced down to see that Charlotte was lying there unconscious.

CHAPTER XVII.

I TAKE A VOW.

FOR an instant I was so shaken by that dead weight on my arm, by that white drawn face turned blindly up to mine, that my heart stopped in my bosom; for I recalled that other white face and that other limp form I had seen but a moment since. Then I shook the horror off.

"She has only fainted," I told myself. "She is not dead; she cannot be dead; it is nothing; it will pass in a moment;" and gripping my teeth together in a very agony of effort I lifted her in my arms and set off up the hillside toward the ledge which Padeloup had pointed out. How I reached it I know not, for ere I covered half the distance the world was reeling red before me and the blood pounding like a hammer in my brain. But reach it I did, and pushing aside that curtain of vines, I saw behind it the dark entrance to the cavern, framed by the solid rock. I stooped and entered, then laid my burden gently on the hard, dry floor, and flung myself well-nigh senseless beside her.

But a moment or two sufficed to give me back my breath, and struggling to my feet I first assured myself that the leafy curtain had fallen naturally into place. Then I made a quick circuit of the cavern. I found it rudely circular, with a

I TAKE A VOW

diameter of perhaps a rod and a height of half as much. Padeloup had doubtless occupied it more than once, for in one corner was a pile of dry moss, which had evidently served for a bed. To this I bore that still, limp body and fell to chafing wrist and temple, with a harrowing fear again gripping my heart. She was so pale, so haggard, her hands were so cold and nerveless, that I was almost ready to believe that the horrors and hardships of the night had slain her. There was no pulse, no respiration. . . .

Despairingly I let the limp hand fall. My path lay clear before me—I would share the fate of my companions—I would die beside them!

I bent and kissed her lips, softly, reverently. And in that instant a gentle sigh came from them, her eyes opened and she lay looking up at me.

"Then you are not dead!" I cried. "You are not dead!" And I caught up her hands again and chafed them madly, feeling with joy indescribable the warmth of life returning to them.

She lay still a moment longer, then gently drew her hands away and raised herself to a sitting posture.

"Where are we?" she questioned, staring about her in the green half-light which filtered through the leafy curtain.

"We are in a cavern which Padeloup knew of," I explained. "We are safe."

"I thought we were under the ocean," she said, still staring about her. "Far down in the depths of the ocean—I have always fancied it must be

THE PATH OF HONOR

like this. But where are the others?" she demanded suddenly.

"That I do not know," I answered as cheerfully as I could. "No doubt they have escaped in another direction;" but in my heart I knew the absurdity of such a hope.

"You left them, then?" she questioned, looking at me from under level brows.

"M. le Comte commanded it," I answered flushing. "Do you not remember?"

She pressed her hands to her temples.

"I remember nothing," she said at last, "except that we climbed a great mountain, and that your arm was about me, aiding me."

I breathed a sigh of relief that her memory stopped there.

"Shall I go back and look for them?" I asked.

"No, no!" she protested, and caught my hand. "Do not leave me here—at least not yet!"

"I shall have to go before long. We must have food."

"I want no food—I feel as though I never shall."

"Nevertheless you must eat. You must be strong and brave. We have a long journey before us."

"A long journey?"

"Yes; we shall not be really safe until we are among M. le Comte's friends in the Bocage."

"Is that far?" she asked.

"Not so far but that we shall win through safely," I assured her.

I TAKE A VOW

She lay back again upon the moss with a long sigh of utter weariness.

"You must sleep," I added, gently. "Do not fight it off—yield to it. You will need your strength—all of it—for to-night."

"For to-night?"

"Yes; we dare not start until darkness comes, and we must get forward as far as we can ere daybreak. You can sleep in perfect security. No one suspects that we are hidden here."

She did not answer, but turned on one side, laid her head upon her arm and closed her eyes. Sleep, I knew, would claim her in a moment.

I crept forward to the mouth of the cavern and sitting down behind the screen of vines pulled them aside a little and peered down the valley, in the hope that I might see Padeloup and M. le Comte making their way toward us. But there was no one in sight, nor could I hear any sound of conflict in the direction whence we had come. It might be, I told myself, that Padeloup by some miracle had again succeeded in saving his master, and that they had fled together in some other direction; but I felt there were limits to the power of even his supreme devotion. Certainly no situation could have been more critical and hopeless than that in which I had left my friend.

Whatever the result of that struggle, there was evidently nothing left for me to do save to stand sentinel over my companion and see that no harm came to her. I sat down with my back against the wall of stone and composed myself as comfort-

THE PATH OF HONOR

ably as I could to watch the valley. Indeed my posture was too comfortable. The knowledge that we were safe, the lifting of the cloud of horror, the slackening of the strain under which I had labored, left me strangely weary. My eyelids drooped, and before I realized the danger I was sound asleep.

I awoke with a guilty start, but a single glance down into the valley reassured me—no danger threatened us from that direction. How long I had slept I could not guess, but it must have been some hours, for I felt refreshed, invigorated, ready for anything—ready especially to undertake an energetic search for food to appease the gnawing in my stomach.

But first I turned back into the cave and bent over my companion. She was still sleeping peacefully. A ray of light which had fought its way through the leafy curtain fell upon her face in benediction. I saw how sleep had wiped away the lines of weariness and care, and I knew she would be ready for the task which nightfall would bring with it.

I drew her cloak more closely about her, then went out softly, leaving her undisturbed. I glanced up and down the valley to assure myself that I was unobserved, drew carefully together the veil of vines behind me, then paused a moment to reflect. I had two things to do—I must secure food, and I must discover if possible the fate of our companions. I resolved to do the latter first, and so proceeded cautiously down the valley, keep-

I TAKE A VOW

ing a sharp lookout on every side. I thought for a time that I had got my directions strangely reversed, for the sun appeared to be rising in the west instead of in the east; but I soon perceived that it was not rising at all, but setting, and that instead of being mid-morning, it was mid-afternoon. I had slept not three or four hours, as I had fancied, but eight or nine.

That discovery had the effect of hastening my steps and lessening my caution. I had no time to lose, and whatever the result of the fight at the cliff, it was improbable that any of the enemy had lingered so long in the neighborhood. So I went forward boldly and as swiftly as I could, down the hill, into the narrow bed of the torrent where now murmured the clear waters of a little brook, over the rough stones, around a jagged point of rock—and the scene of the fight lay before me.

For a moment I saw only the rocks, the red earth. Then my eye was caught by a huddled mass so trampled into the mud as to be almost indistinguishable from it, yet unmistakably a human body. I hastened to it; I bent above it and stared down into the battered and blackened face. Disfigured, repulsive as it was, I knew it instantly—it was Padeloup.

With a sudden feeling of suffocation I stood erect and looked about me, trembling at the thought of the dread objects my eyes sought and yet shrank from. Then I drew a quick breath of relief, of joy, of thankfulness. Padeloup had sacrificed his life, indeed, but not in vain. His

THE PATH OF HONOR

master had escaped—by some miracle he had escaped, bearing his wife with him. But which way had he gone? Why had he not pressed forward to the cave? Which way——

I stopped, shivering, my eyes burning into my brain; for there, in cruel exposure half way down the slope, were two objects. . . .

How I got down to them, shaken as I was by the agony of that discovery, I know not. I remember only the tempest of wild rage which burst within me as I looked down at those mutilated figures. And I held my clenched hands above my head and swore, as there was a God in heaven, that I would have vengeance on the devil who had done this thing. He should pay for it—he should pay to the uttermost, drop by drop. I vowed myself to the task. By my father's memory, by my mother's honor, by my hope of heaven, I swore that for me there should be no rest, no happiness, no contentment, until I had pulled this monster down and sent his soul to the torture which awaited it.

For an instant the mad thought seized me to set off at once on the trail of the murderers, to harry them, cleave them asunder, seize the fiend who had set them on and wring his life out. A superhuman strength possessed me, a divine ardor of vengeance; and not for an instant did I doubt that God would nerve my arm to accomplish all this. But suddenly I remembered that another duty had been laid upon me. I must discharge

I TAKE A VOW

that first; I must go on to the Bocage. Then I could turn back to Dange.

I grew calmer after a time; that divine rage passed and left me weak and shaken. I sat limply down upon a nearby stone and gazed at those desecrated bodies, with hot tears starting from my eyes at thought of the gallant man and fair woman for whom this hideous fate had been reserved. In that moment of anguish there was but one comforting reflection—she had died with her husband's arms about her, his voice in her ears, his kisses on her lips.

Yet, deserted, insentient as they were, I could not leave these bodies here to rot in the sun, food for carrion birds and unclean beasts of the night. Nor could I spare the time to bury them, for the sun was already sinking toward the horizon. I glanced despairingly about me—then I saw the way.

Twenty feet above the bed of the stream some tremendous freshet had eaten into the bank and so undermined it that it seemed to hang tottering in the air. In a moment I had carried the bodies, one by one, into the shadow of this bank and laid them tenderly side by side. Then I hesitated—but only for an instant. I went straight to the spot where Padeloup lay, and half dragging, half carrying, placed him at last beside his master, where he surely had the right to lie—where I was certain he would have wished to lie.

As I was about to turn away a sudden thought struck me. I had donned my gayest suit the night

THE PATH OF HONOR

before,—the suit indeed I had not thought to wear until I approached the high altar at Poitiers,—and though it was already sadly soiled and torn, it must still attract attention to a man with no better means of conveyance than his legs. Here was a disguise ready to my hand; for under the rude garments which Padeloup had worn—stained as they were with blood and dirt—no one would suspect the Royalist. In a moment I had stripped off his stockings, blouse and breeches, cleaned the caked mud from them as well as I could, and throwing my own garments over him, donned his,—not without a shiver of repugnance,—taking care to transfer to my new attire my purse, my ammunition, and the one pistol which remained to me, and to secure the knife which had already done such execution, and which I found gripped in his right hand. I tied his coarse handkerchief about my head, and stopping only for a little prayer clambered to the top of the bank and with my sword began to loosen the overhanging earth. Great cracks showed here and there, and it must soon have fallen of its own weight. So very little remained for me to do, and at the end of a moment's work I saw the cracks slowly widen.

Then, with a dull crash which echoed along the valley, the earth fell upon the bodies, burying them to a depth of many feet, safe from desecration by the fang of brute or the eye of man.

The tears were streaming down my face as I turned away; but I could not linger, for darkness

I TAKE A VOW

was at hand and I had already been too long absent from my charge. I flung my sword far down the cliff, for I would have no further need of it, then with all the speed at my command I retraced my steps along the bed of the stream and upward toward the ledge of rock. As I approached it I fancied I saw a figure slip quickly out of sight behind the vines. Dreading I knew not what, I hastened my steps, swept aside the curtain and stooped to enter.

But even as I did so there came a burst of flame almost in my face, and I felt a sharp, vivid pain tear across my cheek.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CIRCE'S TOILET.

So blinded was I by the flash and by the swirl of acrid smoke which followed it that for an instant I thought there had been some terrible explosion—another mine perhaps, designed to wreck our cavern and entomb us beneath the rocks. Then, in an agony of fear, not for myself, but for the girl confided to my keeping, I sprang forward, determined to close with my assailant before he could fire again. Once my fingers were at his throat, I knew he would never fire. . . .

But at the third step I stumbled over some obstruction and came headlong to the floor. I was up again in an instant, my back to the wall, my pistol in my hand, wondering at my escape. But there was no second attack, not a sound, save my own hurried breathing.

Then, as my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, I saw with astonishment that the cavern was empty. What was it that had happened? Who was it had fired that shot at me? What was the obstruction which had brought me down? I could just discern it on the floor before me—a dim, huddled mass. I went to it, bent over it, peered down at it—and in a sudden panic terror saw that it was Charlotte! The fiends had been watching then; they had seen me leave the cavern; they

CIRCE'S TOILET

had seen me desert her—fool that I was!—they had waited till I was safely away; then they had crept in upon her, surprised her as she slept, secure in the thought that I was watching over her!

With a groan of agony I groped for her wrist and found myself clutching a pistol whose barrel was still warm. In a flash I understood, and my heart bounded again with joy, the while I cursed my carelessness. It was she who had fired at me! How was she to know me in this garb? She had been watching for me outside the cave, and had seen a brigand approaching her. She had slipped behind the curtain, and a moment later I had burst in upon her without a word of warning. Fool that I was! Fool! Fool! And yet my heart was singing with joy and thankfulness—joy that she had escaped; thankfulness that she had turned the pistol against me and not against herself! Had she done that!—but I shook the thought from me lest I break down completely.

I drew her to the entrance of the cavern that the cool air of the evening might play upon her face. At the end of a moment her lips parted in a faint sigh, her bosom rose and fell convulsively and she opened her eyes and stared up at me with a gaze in which horror grew and deepened.

“Do you not know me, my love?” I asked. “It is Tavernay. See!” and I snatched off Pasdeloup’s knotted headgear.

The warm color flooded her face, and she sat suddenly upright.

THE PATH OF HONOR

"Then it was you!" she gasped. "It was you!"

"Yes;" and I laughed with the sheer joy of seeing her again so full of life. "It was I at whom you discharged your pistol. An inch to the right, and I should not be talking to you now;" and I placed my finger on the still smarting scratch across my cheek.

She gave one glance at it, then fell forward, sobbing, her face between her hands. What would I not have given to take her in my arms—to hold her close against my heart—to kiss away those tears! But even in that moment there was about her something which held me back; something which recalled the promise I had made her; something which bade me remember that she was in my care, defenseless. So I stilled the hot pulsing of my blood as far as in me lay, and even succeeded in speaking with a certain coldness.

"Mademoiselle," I said, touching her delicate, quivering shoulder, "it was nothing—or rather it was just what you should have done. The fault was wholly mine. I should not have burst in upon you like that; but I was so worried, so anxious to know that you were safe. You were right in shooting. If you had killed me it would have been no more than I deserved. I blame only myself, and bitterly. I was a fool. I hope you will find it in your heart to pardon me."

Her sobs had ceased, and as I finished she threw back her hair and sat erect again. I saw with astonishment and relief that she was smiling—

CIRCE'S TOILET

and I found her smile more disturbing than her tears.

"Then we are quits, are we not," she asked, "since we each made a mistake?"

"You did not make a mistake," I protested, "so we are not quits until you have forgiven me."

She held out her hand with a charming gesture.

"You are forgiven," she said, "so far as you need forgiveness. And now," she continued, drawing away the hand which I had not the courage to relinquish, and rising quickly to her feet, "what are your plans?"

"There is down yonder," I answered, "a charming little brook, which purls over the stones, and stops to loiter, here and there, in the basins of the rock. The water is very cool and clear."

"Then come!" she cried. "Ah, I am desperately thirsty and frightfully dirty. I am ashamed for you to see me!"

"I was just marvelling," I retorted, "that you had kept yourself so immaculate. I cannot understand it."

"Immaculate!" she echoed, and set off down the slope.

But suddenly she stopped.

"Shall we return?" she asked. "Shall we see the cave again?"

"No, I think not," I answered; "we must be starting westward."

"Then I must say good-by to it;" and she ran back to the entrance, drew aside the curtain and fell upon her knees. I saw her throw a kiss into

THE PATH OF HONOR

the darkness and her head bent for a moment as though in prayer. I, too, closed my eyes and prayed God that He would give me strength to guide this woman through to safety. At last she arose and rejoined me.

"It is a lovable cave," she said, "and it kept us safe. It would have been ungrateful to go away without a word of thanks;" and somehow, for me, as for her, the cavern in that instant assumed a personality, benign and cheerful. I could fancy it glowing with pleasure at thought of this last good deed.

"You were right," I agreed. "But then you are always right."

"Oh, no," she protested quickly. "Sometimes I am very wrong. But you will discover that for yourself."

"Shall I? When?"

"All too soon, I fear;" and she looked at me with a curious little smile.

"I don't believe it!" I retorted, with conviction.

She only smiled again in a way I could not understand, and blushed and went on without speaking. Who can read a woman's thoughts? Certainly not I!

But I was fiercely, madly happy. For the moment no thought of the future, of its penalties and duties, shadowed me. I was content to be here with this brave and lovely girl, alone with her—a comrade and friend. Since nothing more was possible,—since to friend and comrade I could not add lover,—I would yet be happy in what was

CIRCE'S TOILET

granted me. And that I must be content with this, I saw too well—not in any coldness or aversion, but by a subtle change of manner, the merest nuance of expression, which at the same time kept me near to her, and yet held me away. On the tower she had permitted my endearments, had even raised her lips to mine; but that was looking in the face of death at a moment when we need take no thought for the future—at a moment when she had wished to comfort me, and herself stood in need of comfort. But we had emerged from that shadow; there was the future again to be reckoned with, and between us an impalpable but invulnerable veil was stretched which I must never hope to pass.

We reached the brook, and I placed two broad flat stones at the edge of a little pool where the lucid water paused for an instant before pursuing its course along the rocky way, and watched her while she stooped and drank. She had cast aside her cloak, and I noted with a clear delight the soft curve of her arms, the slim grace of neck and shoulders.

“Now it is your turn, my friend,” she said, and made room for me.

I knelt and drank too. How good the water tasted! How it cleansed and purified the parched throat! How it heartened the whole body!

“And now I shall use some of it externally,” she said, as I stood aside; and I sat down on a near-by rock to enjoy the spectacle.

She rolled back her sleeves and bound her hair

THE PATH OF HONOR

in a tight coil upon her head. Then from some hidden pocket she produced a dainty handkerchief, and dipping it in the stream, applied it vigorously to face and neck. I saw her skin glow and brighten under touch of the cool water; she seemed like a nymph——

Suddenly she looked aside and caught my eyes.

"Is this the first time you have seen a lady at her toilet, M. de Tavernay?" she asked, witheringly.

"The very first, mademoiselle."

"And you feel no compunctions of conscience for keeping your seat there?"

"None in the least," I answered calmly. "I must see that no enemy surprises you."

"From which direction would an enemy come?"

"Probably from down the valley."

"You have eyes, then, in the back of your head? How fortunate!"

"Oh, I glance around from time to time," I explained coolly. "Surely you would not deny me the pleasure I have in looking at you! That would be heartless!"

She glanced at me again, with a little pout.

"But I should think that you yourself would feel the need of a bath," she retorted.

"So that you might feel some pleasure in looking at me?" I asked. "I know I must appear a most hideous scoundrel. My skin is fairly stiff with the dirt upon it; and yet I dare not so much as touch it with water."

CIRCE'S TOILET

"Dare not?"

"A clean skin would hardly be in keeping with this clothing," I pointed out.

"That is true," she admitted, with a swift glance over it. "But why did you assume such a disguise? Who will see you?"

"Many people, I am afraid. In the first place we must have food."

"It is useless to deny that I am very hungry," she agreed.

"Instead of seeking food, I fell asleep," I confessed miserably. "I shall never forgive myself."

"Nonsense! We both of us needed rest first of all. Indeed I find the pangs of hunger rather exhilarating—and how I shall relish the food when we get it! But continue: whom else shall you meet?"

"In the second place," I went on, "I must ask my way, since I am wholly unfamiliar with this country."

"Yes, of course."

"And in the third place, in a country even thinly settled, we must be prepared for chance-encounters. To all the people we meet I must appear a peasant in order to protect you."

"To protect me?"

"Yes; you are my prisoner—a spoil of war; there is a price on your head which I am anxious to secure. I may even have to be a little brutal with you."

"I pardon you in advance," she smiled. "Do not hesitate to be as brutal as is needful."

THE PATH OF HONOR

"I had thought at first," I explained, "of endeavoring to get for you a disguise somewhat like my own, but I saw the folly of the plan when I came to consider it."

"Why, pray?"

"Oh, mademoiselle," I said, "you would be no less beautiful in the dress of a peasant than in the robe of a queen! Such a disguise would deceive no one. On the contrary, it would serve only to attract attention, since a diamond is never so brilliant as in a tarnished setting."

"Thank you, monsieur," she said, bowing. "That was very prettily turned. But since you slumbered all the afternoon, where did you find those garments? Had some one thrown them away?"

"No, mademoiselle," I stammered, turning red and white, for I had not expected the question. "I—that is——"

"What is it?" she demanded, looking at me steadily. "Do not fear to tell me. Oh, I have been selfish! I have been thinking only of myself! Where are the others, M. de Tavernay? Where are our friends? Did they, also, escape?"

With her clear eyes upon me, it was impossible to lie as I had intended doing.

"No," I answered in a low voice, "they did not escape."

"They were captured?" she cried, her face livid.

"Oh, not so bad as that! Thank God, not so bad as that! Madame was killed by that first shot

CIRCE'S TOILET

and died in the arms of the man she loved, smiling up at him. M. le Comte and Padeloup met the end as brave men should, facing the enemy. It was only I who ran away," I added, the tears blinding me.

She held out her hand with a quick gesture of sympathy and understanding.

"It was for my sake," she said softly. "Never forget that, my friend. In telling the story over to yourself never forget that."

"You are kind," I murmured with full heart. "That thought alone consoles me—it was not for myself I fled."

And then I told her of the grave which I had improvised, of how I had placed Padeloup's body beside that of his master. She heard me to the end with shining eyes; and when I had ended she sat for a moment, her hand still in mine, her head bowed; and I knew that she was praying.

"They are at peace," she said at last, looking up at me with eyes tear-dimmed. "Nothing can harm them now. And God will avenge them."

"I am sure of it," I answered, "for I am the instrument which He has chosen."

"The instrument?"

"I have sworn to kill the scoundrel who set them on," I said simply. "I know that He heard the oath and approved it."

She sat looking at me a moment longer, then passed her hand before her eyes and rose to her feet.

"You will keep the vow, M. de Tavernay," she

THE PATH OF HONOR

said quietly; "I am sure of it. And the same God who listened and approved will see you safe through for your guerdon at the end."

"My guerdon!" I stammered, startled out of my self-control. "Ah, mademoiselle, I crave no guerdon; at least there is only one——"

She was looking at me steadily, and the words died upon my lips, for the veil had fallen again between us.

"Come, monsieur," she said in another tone, "we must be setting forward. See—it is growing dark."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE FIRST VENTURE.

WE turned our faces westward toward the sun, whose last rays were gilding the clouds along the horizon, following the little valley which had been hollowed in the hills by the stream at which we had drunk. As we went on, this valley opened more and more, changing from a rough and precipitous aspect to one smooth and rolling, giving promise of human occupancy. Our most urgent need was food, and I determined to apply for it at the first house we came to, no matter what its appearance,—first with silver, and if that failed, with a loaded pistol as a persuasive.

So I kept a sharp lookout, but for nearly an hour we pressed forward without catching a glimpse of any human habitation save a few shacks long since deserted and falling to decay. Plainly this country had not escaped the blight which had fallen on the rest of France—which swept the peasants into the armies, drove the nobles abroad, and left the fields deserted. Darkness closed in about us as we went; but I still kept my eyes to left and right, in the hope that they might be greeted by a ray of light from some welcome window.

At last my companion, who had kept close at my heels, halted and sank down upon a hummock of earth with a sigh of weariness.

THE PATH OF HONOR

"I fear I must ask a breathing-spell, my friend," she said.

"Of course," I answered instantly. "I have been thoughtless;" and I dropped beside her. Even in the darkness I could see by the white face she bent upon me how utterly spent she was, and a sharp twinge of remorse seized me. "I strode along without considering you!"

"You paid me the compliment of thinking me not entirely a weakling," she corrected, and smiled wearily.

"You turn it skilfully," I said. "At least, I hope you will discourage any more such compliments."

"Very well," she agreed; "I promise. But we must be getting on;" and she attempted to rise.

I caught her arm and held her in her seat.

"We must be doing no such thing!" I retorted. "It is worse than foolish to plunge ahead as we have been doing, half-starved. You are going to remain here and rest. I will make you a bed of grass and leaves in this little hollow, and you will lie here quietly and gaze at the stars, thinking of me as kindly as you can, while I go in search of food. I shall not be long away, and you will be quite safe."

She sat without answering, watching me while I piled such dry grass as I could find into the little hollow. At last it was ready.

"Now," I said, turning to her, "if you will rest here——"

"You are very good to me," she breathed, and

THE FIRST VENTURE

took her place upon the couch I had provided, which, I fear, was none too soft.

"Oh, no," I answered, controlling myself with a mighty effort as I bent above her and assured myself that her cloak was snug about her; "I am not wholly unselfish. I must keep you fresh; I must not permit you to exhaust yourself, or you will be getting ill, and then what should I do?"

"No, I shall not be ill," she said quite positively. "I am not such a weakling as that!"

"Besides," I added, "I am frightfully hungry; I must have something to eat, if I commit murder for it."

"You will not expose yourself?" she asked quickly.

"No; there is no danger," I assured her.

"I shall pay for you," she added calmly. "And I fear there is one thing I must ask of you."

"Ask it," I said.

"Before I left my room at the château," she continued, "I chose the heaviest shoes I had——"

There was no need that she should say more. I bent and touched one of the little feet just peeping from beneath the cloak. However heavy the shoes had been, they were certainly far too light for the rough service which had been exacted of them. They were almost in tatters, and I could guess how the sharp stones which had torn the leather had bruised the tender flesh within. Yet she had followed me without a sigh, without a murmur! Impulsively I bent and kissed the

THE PATH OF HONOR

instep of the little shoe, then rose unsteadily to my feet.

"I will get you another pair," I said; "and if I am to have any peace of mind, you must not again permit me to forget your welfare, as I have been doing. With the best intentions in the world, I am only a selfish and obtuse fellow, with a brain not bright enough to think of more than one thing at a time."

"I saw how your thoughts were occupied," she protested. "I knew that our safety depended upon you, and I did not wish to disturb you."

"To disturb me?" I echoed. "Ah, for once, mademoiselle, you were not really kind; for by keeping silent you have done more than that—you have made me suffer. But there!—I am wasting time, and I can guess your hunger by my own. I will go. You are not afraid?"

"No," she murmured; "and yet I hope that you will not be long."

"No," I said; "no;" and not daring to trust myself further, I turned and strode away through the darkness.

Only the biting need for prompt and well-directed action enabled me to master the sweet emotion which those words, so softly uttered, had awakened. But I managed to crush it down, to put it behind me, and to address myself wholly to the task in hand. I must get food at once, and at any price. But food in such a wilderness!

Yet fortune favored me,—or perhaps the country was not such a wilderness as I imagined,—for

THE FIRST VENTURE

at the end of ten minutes' brisk walking I collided with a hedge, and too rejoiced at the discovery to heed the scratches I had sustained, I felt my way along it and came at last to a gate. It was not even latched, so I pushed it open and passed through. Once on the other side of it, I found myself in what seemed an orchard.

Arguing that where there was a hedge, a gate, and an orchard, there must also be a house, I pushed forward among the trees and came out at last into the clear air beyond. At the first glance I perceived a light just ahead of me, and made my way toward it with a deep thankfulness readily imagined. As I drew nearer I saw that the light proceeded from the window of a small house which I was evidently approaching from the rear. I advanced cautiously and looked within. Three men were sitting about a table on which was a bottle of wine and the remains of a meal. They were talking together with great earnestness.

There was no time for hesitation or the weighing of risks, so I waited to see no more, but hastened around the house. It fronted upon a road which seemed wide and well kept—undoubtedly a high-road, and not a mere country lane. A creaking sign proclaimed the place an inn. I raised the latch and entered, and without pausing to look about me sat down at the nearest table and rapped loudly. One of the three men whom I had observed through the window arose and came to me.

"You are the inn-keeper?" I asked.

THE PATH OF HONOR

"Yes," he answered gruffly, his brows drawn close with annoyance, not in the least in the manner of a man welcoming a customer.

"Well, citizen," I continued, "I am in great haste—I am on an errand of importance; I must be off at once. Can I have some food to take with me—a fowl, say, and whatever else is at hand; together with two bottles of wine?"

"All that may no doubt be had, citizen," he answered, relaxing nothing of his sinister expression. "But there are certain difficulties in the way."

"Money you mean?" and I laughed and threw two silver crowns upon the table. "Well, there it is, and you cannot quarrel with it. I don't offer you assignats, mind you—and one doesn't often hear the ring of honest coin nowadays."

"That is true," he admitted; and his face relaxed a little as he eyed the money. "But there is yet another difficulty."

"And what is it?" I demanded.

"The other difficulty," he answered, watching me keenly, "is that in giving you these provisions I may be succoring an enemy of the Nation."

I threw myself back in my chair and burst into a roar of laughter. Looking back upon it, there is no moment of my life of which I am more proud than I am of that one.

"An enemy of the Nation!" I repeated, and then fell suddenly silent and affected to study him. "But how am I to know," I asked at last, "that that description may not really be deserved by

THE FIRST VENTURE

you? How am I to know that it is not some villainy against the Nation which you are plotting at that table yonder?"

He started, turned red, shifted under my gaze, and I saw that I had won.

"I swear to you, citizen," he began; but I cut him short.

"And I also swear to you," I retorted, "that I am on the Nation's business, which brooks no delay. If you are a friend of the Nation, give me food; if you are its enemy, refuse it. The Nation knows how to punish, and its hand is heavy. Shall I write your name in my little book, and after it the word 'suspect'? Come, prove yourself a good citizen, and at the same time get these pieces of silver for your pocket."

He hesitated yet a moment, going from one foot to the other in perplexity; but the silver, or my arguments, or perhaps both together, carried the day.

"You shall have it," he said, and went to the farther end of the room, where he opened a cupboard which was at the same time larder and wine-cellar. From it he produced two bottles, a fowl already roasted, and a loaf of bread. As he passed his two companions I fancied that a glance of understanding passed between them. A moment later they pushed back their chairs, bade him a noisy good-night, and left the room.

"How will this do?" asked my host, placing the bottles, the loaf and the fowl on the table before me, his vexation quite vanished.

THE PATH OF HONOR

"Excellently," I answered, noting with surprise that the fowl had really some flesh upon its bones. "One thing more: this road, I suppose, leads to——"

"Loudun," he said.

"And from there to Thouars?"

"Undoubtedly."

"I am on the right track, then," I said, simulating a sigh of relief. "That is all," I added; for I saw it was useless, as well as dangerous, to ask for shoes. "The silver is yours;" and while he tested it with his teeth, I placed a bottle in either pocket, and with the loaf under my arm, and the fowl in my hand, opened the door and stepped out into the night.

I had my pistol ready, and looked sharply to right and left, but saw no one. Then, taking care to walk in the middle of the road, I pushed forward at a good pace until I was well away from the inn. I glanced around from time to time, but saw no sign that I was followed nor heard any sound of pursuing footsteps. So telling myself at last that my fears were groundless, I leaped the ditch at the side of the road and retraced my steps, until I came again to the hedge back of the inn. From this I had but to follow the course of the brook, here the merest thread of water, and at the end of ten minutes I was back again at my starting-point. I stopped and bent over the hollow, when a soft hand rose and touched my cheek.

"Is it you, M. de Tavernay?" asked a voice.

THE FIRST VENTURE

"Oh, but I am glad! I was beginning to fear for you. What is that in your hand?"

"It is food," I answered, sitting down beside her and laughing with sheer joy. I drew my knife and severed loaf and fowl alike into two equal portions; then with the point of it drew the corks and placed the bottles carefully in a hollow of the grass, propping them upright with some little stones. "There!" I said, "the meal is served. I think we may dispense with grace, as we must with knives and forks."

She laughed delightedly as she took the portions I placed in her hands.

"You are a wizard, M. de Tavernay," she said. "I had expected at most a crust of bread, and you provide a feast."

"A feast is of value," I pointed out, "only when it is in one's stomach."

"Well, this shall soon be in mine," she retorted. "Never in my life have I had such an appetite;" and she attacked the food with a vigor which it did me good to see.

Nor was I behind her. Never before or since have I tasted a fowl so tender, bread so sweet, wine so satisfying. It was almost worth the privations we had undergone—it was nature's compensation for that suffering. And our first hunger past, we took time to pause and chat a little. She had regained all her old spirit, and I am sure that for her, as for me, there was something fascinating and even dangerous in that moment. We forgot past sorrow and future peril;

THE PATH OF HONOR

we forgot our present situation and the trials we must still encounter. The moon was rising again over the hills to the east, and revealed, just as it had done the night before, all the subtle delicacy of her beauty. What she was thinking of I know not, but my own thoughts flew back irresistibly to that hour in the garden—that sweet, swift-winged hour!

“But was it only last night?” I murmured, not realizing that I spoke aloud until the words were uttered.

“Indeed, it seems an age away!” she assented absently; and a sudden burst of joy glowed within me.

“So you were thinking of it, too!” I cried, and tried to catch her hand.

“Thinking of what?” she asked, drawing away from me.

“Of the garden—of the few precious moments we passed together there,” I answered eagerly, my eyes on hers.

“On the contrary,” she answered coolly, though I could have sworn she blushed, “I was thinking only that last night I was safe with my friends at the château——”

“Oh!” I said, not waiting to hear more; and I sank back into my seat with a gesture of impatience.

“Though if you had not interrupted my thoughts,” she continued, smiling slyly, “I should doubtless in time have come to the garden scene.”

“In time!” I repeated bitterly. “Of all the

THE FIRST VENTURE

hours of my life, that one is ever present with me. It eclipses all the rest."

"It will fade!" she assured me lightly. "It will fade! As for me, I do not dwell upon it, because I must be careful."

"Careful?"

"Certainly. Careful not to permit myself to think too tenderly of a man already betrothed. That would be the height of folly. Suppose I should begin to love him!"

"I see you are armed against me," I said dismally, "and that the poniard of your wit is as sharp as ever."

"It is the instinctive weapon of our sex," she explained. "We draw it whenever we scent danger. Once it fails us we are lost."

"It failed you for a time last night, thank God!" I retorted. "I have that to remember;" and I recalled the sweet face raised to mine, the yielding form——

"Ungenerous!" she cried. "I did not think it of you, M. de Tavernay! Darkness and stress of storm drive a bird to take refuge in your bosom, and at daybreak you wring its neck!"

"No," I said, with a sudden revulsion of feeling, "I release it; I toss it back into the air; it flies away without a thought of me, glad only to escape; but I—I remember it, and love it, and I thank heaven for the chance which drove it to me."

Impulsively she reached out her hand and touched my own.

THE PATH OF HONOR

"That is more like yourself," she said. "Now I know you again. And perhaps, my friend, the bird is not so ungrateful as you think."

"It may even return to the bosom which sheltered it?" I asked softly, leaning forward. "You think that, mademoiselle?"

"I fancy it would fear to do so."

"Fear?" I repeated. "Surely—that least of all!"

"Fear that it might not find the bosom empty," she explained remorselessly; and I saw the old light in her eyes. "Fear that it might blunder upon another occupant with a better right——"

I drew away from her, wounded, stung.

"But whether it returns or not," she added in a gentler tone, "I am sure it will never forget."

And with that comfort, cold as it was, I was forced to be content.

"Come," I said, a sudden impatience of the place seizing me, "we must be getting forward. The moon will light our way." And then my heart fell suddenly; for I remembered her torn and ragged shoes. "I could not get you shoes," I said.

"No one can accomplish the impossible. It was foolish of me to ask for them."

"I *will* get them," I said; "but until then I shall have to carry you."

"Nonsense!" she protested. "You will do nothing of the kind. With that light in the sky I can choose my steps. Besides, my shoes are stronger than you imagine."

THE FIRST VENTURE

"The road is not far off," I said. "Once we have gained that, you may perhaps be able to walk alone. But I shall not permit you to torture yourself by limping over this rough ground."

She was looking at me with defiance in her eyes, and I saw that I should have to use *finesse*.

"Please do not forget," I reminded her, "the selfishness of my disposition. One step upon a sharp stone and you will be so lamed that I shall have to carry you, not a matter of a few hundred yards, but all the way to the Bocage. My back aches at thought of it; and so I propose for myself the lighter task, in order to escape the other."

Her look changed from defiance to amusement.

"You have a wit truly ingenious, M. de Tavernay," she said. "I yield to it—for the moment."

"I knew that reason would convince you," I replied, trembling at the thought that I should have her in my arms again. "Come, there is still a little wine in the bottles. I propose a toast—the toast we drank last night;" and I arose and bared my head. "God and the King!"

But that toast was never to be drunk; for even as I raised the bottle, it was dashed from my lips, and two men hurled themselves upon me out of the darkness.

CHAPTER XX.

A DAGGER OF ANOTHER SORT.

FOR an instant I did not resist, so sudden and unlooked-for was the attack; then, as I felt a merciless hand gripping my throat, I struck savagely at a face I could dimly see just in front of my own. A burst of blood flooded down over it, changing it into a hideous mask; but again I felt those fingers of steel about my neck—fingers which tightened and tightened, tear at them as I might. In a mad frenzy of rage and agony, I struck again and again at the face before me, until my tongue swelled in my mouth and the heavens danced red before my eyes. This was the end, then! I was to be murdered here by these tavern vagabonds. That vengeance I had sworn was never to be accomplished; and Charlotte—Charlotte——

The pang which struck through me was not one of physical suffering alone; indeed, for an instant I ceased to feel those savage fingers. Ah, I could die—that were nothing! But to leave her! Had God abandoned us? Where was His justice? Where was His mercy? Again I tore at those fingers, desperately, madly. I felt the blood spurt from my nostrils, the heavens reeled before me, a black moon in a sky of living flame. . . .

A DAGGER OF ANOTHER SORT

What magic was it drew that breath of air into my lungs?—life-giving air, which sent the heart bounding and the pulse leaping in answer! A second!—a third! I was dimly conscious of a knife gleaming in the air. I struck again. The face vanished from before me. But the fingers!—the fingers!—they were buried in my flesh!—they were crushing my life out! I raised a hand to my throat. The fingers were not there! And again the sky turned red, and a black moon hung low in it—a moon which grew and grew, until it swallowed the heavens and the earth. . . .

I was lying upon a vast bed of sea-weed, which rose and fell with the waves of the ocean. Oh, the peace of it! the bliss of it,—save that from time to time a single strand coiled about my throat like a living thing, and would have choked me had I not torn it off. The wish came to me that I might lie there forever, rocked in that mammoth cradle, lulled by the murmur of waters never ceasing. Then, afar off across the undulating plain, I saw a figure speeding toward me, and knew it was my love. At last she reached me, bent above me, looked into my face, flung herself upon me, calling my name and pressing warm kisses on my lips—kisses which I could not return, struggle as I might, for my lips seemed frozen into stone.

I tried to throw my arms about her, but some mighty weight held them at my side. I tried to call her name, but my voice died in my throat. Then I knew that I was dead, and a great sadness

THE PATH OF HONOR

fell upon me. She would never know that I felt her kisses, that I heard her voice. She would never know how I loved her! The thought stung me to fury. She must know! she should know! For her I would burst the bonds of death itself! I fought against them desperately, desperately, every muscle strained to breaking. . . .

I opened my eyes to see a face bending over me—the face of my dream. Very near she sat,—so near that I could feel the sweet warmth of her body,—and she was bathing my face and neck with the cool water from the brook. How good it felt—like the hand of God Himself! I saw that she had filled a bottle with it, and guessing the wish I had not strength to utter, she held it to my lips, and gave me a long draught.

It sent new life through me. The pain of swallowing was as nothing to the delight it gave me. I lay still a moment looking up at her; then I sat erect unsteadily.

“What is it?” I asked hoarsely. “What has happened to me?”

“Then you are not dead!” she cried. “Then you are going to live! Oh, thank God!”

“Dead!” I repeated in amazement. “No—nor like to be!”

Then my eyes fell upon an object at my feet, and in a flash I remembered. I sat for a moment looking down at that huddled shape, touched here and there into hideous distinctness by the rays of the moon.

A DAGGER OF ANOTHER SORT

"But even yet I do not understand," I said at last. "What killed him? A bolt from heaven? God saves me for my vengeance then!"

She did not answer, only huddled her head into her arms and swayed forward, shaken by a convulsive shuddering.

I leaned down and looked at the body. Was it blasted, shrivelled as in a furnace? Had I really been saved by God's intervention? And how else, I asked myself; what less than a miracle could have saved me?

The body was lying on its face, and as I stared down at it, I fancied I saw something protruding from the back. I touched it—it was the handle of a knife. I drew it forth, not without some effort, and recognized the knife as mine—Pasdeloup's—the knife I had used to cut the bread—the knife I had left lying in the hollow beside the bottles. Then I understood.

"You!" I cried, staring at the bowed figure. "You!"

She did not answer, only sat and shivered, her head in her arms.

"You!" I said again. "It was you who saved me?"

She raised her head and looked at me.

"I saw—that—he—was choking—you," she gasped. "God—guided my hand—to the knife;" and she held it up and looked at it with a kind of horror.

I caught the hand and drew it to my lips.

"Mademoiselle," I said hoarsely, "I loved you

THE PATH OF HONOR

before—I reverence you now. But where is the other? I thought there were two of them.”

“There were,” she answered. “The other tried to stab you, but you struck him and he fled.”

I started up in alarm.

“Then must we flee too, and instantly,” I cried. “He will return and bring others with him. Come;” and I raised her to her feet.

“But are you strong enough?” she asked.

“Strong enough? I am strong as Hercules! Why should I not be since joy gives strength? Come.”

Then I remembered her ragged shoes. What hope of escape was there when our flight must be at a snail’s pace?

“Come,” I repeated; and held out my arms.

“What do you mean?” she demanded, looking at me darkly.

“I am to carry you, you know, until we reach the road. That is already settled, so we need not waste time arguing it over again.”

“Indeed!” she retorted. “But that was under different circumstances. Besides, we are not going toward the road, are we?”

“No,” I admitted; “we are going straight up this hill.”

“Very well,” she said, “then our agreement is at an end, and I refuse to reconsider. It is you who are wasting time.”

I saw she was immovable, and a mad impulse seized me to snatch her up despite her protests; to overpower her resistance. . . .

A DAGGER OF ANOTHER SORT

Then my glance fell upon the body. In an instant I had dropped beside it and was pulling the rude, strong shoes from its feet.

"What are you doing?" she gasped, staring down at me.

"Sit here beside me," I commanded, my heart beating triumphantly; and as she obeyed, still staring, I pulled off my own shoes and slipped them over hers. Worn in that way, they fitted as well as could be desired; they would at least protect her from the roughness of the road until better ones could be found. Then I stuffed the dead man's shoes with grass until they fitted my own feet snugly.

"Now," I said, "we are ready to be off;" and I sprang to my feet and drew her after me.

"You are a most ingenious man, M. de Tavernay," she commented. "I am ready;" and she followed me up the hill and through a thicket of underbrush which crowned its summit.

Not a moment too soon; for as we paused to look back before starting downward, we saw a score of torches advancing up the valley toward the spot which we had left. Evidently there was to be no chance of failure this time.

"Come," I said, and caught her hand.

The slope was free from underbrush and fairly smooth.

"A race!" she cried, her eyes dancing; and a moment later we arrived breathless at the bottom.

Here there was a wall of stone. We rested a moment on top of it, then I helped her down into

THE PATH OF HONOR

the narrow, rutted road beyond. It ran, as nearly as I could judge, east and west, and turning our faces westward, we hurried along it, anxious to put all chance of capture far behind.

The night was sweet and clear and my heart sang with the very joy of living. I felt strong, vigorous, ready to face any emergency. My recent encounter had left no souvenir more serious than a tender throat, and as I thought of it I wondered again at the resolution which had nerved that soft and delicate arm to drive the blade home in the back of my assailant. She, too, had proved herself able to meet a crisis bravely, and to rise to whatever heroism it demanded.

Ah, if she only loved me! I might yet find some way to evade with honor the unwelcome match my father had arranged for me. But she did not; so there was an end of that. I must go on to the end, even as I had promised. But it was a bitter thing!

"Why that profound sigh, M. de Tavernay?" asked my comrade, looking up at me with dancing eyes, quite in her old manner. "Surely we are in no present danger?"

"I was thinking not of the present but of the future," I answered.

"You think, then, that danger lies before us?"

"Undoubtedly!"

"But why cross the bridge till we come to it?"

"Because," I answered, "since the bridge must be crossed it is as well to do it now as any time."

A DAGGER OF ANOTHER SORT

"But perhaps it may be avoided—one can never tell."

"No," I said gloomily, "it is a destiny not to be escaped."

"You frighten me!" she cried; but when I glanced at her she looked anything but frightened. "What is it that awaits us? Let me know the worst!"

"It was of myself I was speaking," I explained.

"Another instance of your selfishness! Are you going to face the enemy and bid me run away? Depend upon it, I shall think twice before obeying."

"This is an enemy which you will never be called upon to face, mademoiselle. I was thinking of that moment,—a moment not far distant,—when I have placed you in the hands of your friends and must bid you adieu."

"To turn your face southward toward Poitiers? Inconstant man! I did not think you so eager!"

"No, mademoiselle; I turn back to Dange, as you know, on an errand of vengeance, and then——"

"To Poitiers on an errand of love. To the hero his reward!"

"Say rather on an errand of duty," I corrected.

"It will become an errand of love also, once you have seen the lady—what is her name?"

"No matter," I said shortly, and strode on in silence.

"M. de Tavernay," she said in a provoking

THE PATH OF HONOR

voice, keeping pace with me, "I should like to make you a wager."

"What is it?" I asked, none too gently.

"That my prediction will come true," she answered, laughing. "That you will fall madly in love with this lady—oh, desperately in love with her! and once you have safely married her will remember this youthful passion only with a smile. Come; the stake shall be anything you like."

This time I was thoroughly angry. Even if she did not love me she had no right to wound me, to stab me deliberately, maliciously, with a smile on her lips. She had no right to draw amusement from my sufferings, to torture me just for the pleasure of watching my agony. So I quickened my pace and strode on in silence, my hands clinched, trying to stifle the pain at my heart.

A touch on my arm aroused me.

"*Ciel!*" gasped a voice; and I turned to see my companion still at my side indeed, but spent and breathless. "Did you fancy these shoes of yours were seven-league boots?" she questioned when she could speak. "Or did you desire to abandon me out here in this wilderness?"

"It would be no more than you deserve!" I retorted; then, as I remembered how fast I had been walking and pictured her uncomplaining struggle to keep pace with me, I relented. "Pardon me," I said, humbly; "I am a brute. Come; sit here in the shadow of this tree and rest. We are beyond danger of pursuit—besides, no one can see us here."

A DAGGER OF ANOTHER SORT

She permitted me to lead her to the shadow and sat down. I leaned against the tree and stared moodily along the road.

"What is it, monsieur?" she asked at last. "Still brooding on the future?"

"No, mademoiselle," I answered; "since it must be endured I shall waste no more thought upon it."

"That is wise," she commended. "That is what I have advised from the first. Besides, you should remember it is when troubles are approaching that they appear most terrible."

"A thousand thanks," I said dryly. "You are no doubt right."

"And then," she added, "one grows morbid when one thinks too much of oneself."

"It was not wholly with myself I was occupied this time," I said; "or at least with myself only in relation to you. I was thinking how unfit I am to take care of you; how little I merit the trust which M. le Comte reposed in me when he gave you into my keeping. I permit you to limp along behind me with bruised and wounded feet until you sink exhausted; I lead two scoundrels, whose pursuit I had foreseen, straight to your hiding-place and would have perished but for your courage and address; I stride along at top speed until you are ready to die of fatigue; I show myself a fool, a boor, and yet expect you to feel some kindness for me. Hereafter you will command this expedition; I am merely your servant; I am at your orders."

THE PATH OF HONOR

"Very well," she responded instantly, "I accept. My first order is that you sit here beside me;" and she patted the spot with her hand.

"A soldier does not sit in the presence of his commander," I protested.

"What! Rebellion already!" she cried. "A fine beginning, truly!"

I sat down, a little giddy at this unexpected kindness.

"And now," she continued severely, "you will repeat after me the following words: Mademoiselle de Chambray——"

"Mademoiselle de Chambray——"

"I know you are only a silly girl——"

"I know nothing of the sort," I protested.

"Will you obey my orders, M. de Tavernay, or will you not?" she inquired sternly.

"No one can be compelled to perjure himself," I answered doggedly.

"Nor shall I compel you to do so. We will continue then: I know you are only a silly girl, yet even a silly girl should hesitate to do a friend malicious injury. Nevertheless I will forgive you, for I see how you yourself regret it and I am too generous to strike back, even though you deserve it."

I looked down at her and saw that there were indeed tears in the eyes which she turned up to me.

She held out her hand with a little tremulous smile.

A DAGGER OF ANOTHER SORT

"Will you not forgive me, my friend?" she asked.

I seized the hand and covered it with kisses.

"I adore you!" I cried. "Adore you!—adore you!"

And I would have asked nothing better, nothing sweeter, than to die there at her feet, with her warm hand in mine and her eyes enfolding me in a lambent flame which raised me to a height that kings might envy.

For in that instant I knew that she loved me.

CHAPTER XXI.

FALSE PRETENSES.

BUT only for the merest breath did she permit her soul to stand unveiled before me. Then she drew her hand away and fenced herself again with that invulnerable armor.

"Come, my friend," she said, and her voice sounded a trifle unsteady in my ears, "we must be going on—we have a long journey still before us."

I arose like a drunken man. I dared not believe what that glimpse of glory had revealed to me; it seemed too wonderful, too stupendous to be true. I had looked into her soul and seen love there—but was it really there? Or was it merely the reflection of what my own soul disclosed?

I glanced down at her, but she was staring straight before her as she walked steadily forward with a face so cold and impassive that the doubt grew, enwrapped me, darkened to conviction. It was folly to suppose that her eyes had really revealed their secret; it was absurd to believe that such a secret lay behind them. Who was I that I should hope to waken love in the breast of such a woman as this? Pity, perhaps—sympathy, friendship, kindness—anything but the deep, splendid passion I hungered for. She had been moved for the moment, but plainly she already

FALSE PRETENSES

regretted her emotion. Well, I certainly would never remind her of it.

So we went on through the night, taking at every forking of the road the way which led nearest the west, for in the west lay safety. But I knew we had ten leagues and more to cover ere we should reach the Bocage, and the nearer we approached our destination the more closely would danger encompass us. From south and east troops were being massed to crush out by sheer weight of numbers the flame of insurrection which had arisen so suddenly in the very heart of France. From every town within fifty leagues the National Guard had been summoned. From Paris itself levies were hastening—levies of Septembrists, cut-throats, assassins, asking nothing better than permission to murder and pillage, and commanded by a general determined not to fight but to destroy, not to defeat but to exterminate—in a word, not to rest until all Vendée had been made a wilderness, a barren waste. This line of enemies, marching forward in this temper, we were forced to pierce in order to reach our friends.

The moon rose high in the heavens, paused at the zenith, then started on its course down the western sky. I thanked the fortune which gave us her friendly light to guide us, for the road grew ever more wild and rough. In one place indeed it was merely the bed of a torrent little different from that over which we had already toiled so painfully. So we left it, and breaking our way

THE PATH OF HONOR

through the hedge which bordered the road, followed along beside it.

Even I was beginning to feel fatigued and I could guess at my companion's weariness, yet she refused to listen to my suggestion that we stop and rest. But dawn was not far distant and we must find some safe hiding-place for the day. There were no houses in sight, nor had we seen any for some time, but where there was a road, however bad, there must also be people to travel it; and to seek rest, to resign oneself to sleep, save in a safe covert, would be the height of folly.

The country had grown more open and level with only an occasional tree here and there, and was evidently used for pasturage, though I saw no sheep nor cattle; but at last along a ridge at our right I caught sight of a thicket, and toward this we made our way. We found it a dense growth of small saplings and underbrush and broke our way into it with difficulty; but the event repaid the labor, for at last we came to a little glade not over a rod across and carpeted with grass.

"Here is our resting-place," I said, "and our home for another day."

My companion sank down with a sigh of utter fatigue.

"I am very tired," she murmured, and drew off the shoes which I had slipped over her own.

"You are to sleep until you are quite rested," I added. "We will remain here until evening. Then, after darkness falls and before the moon

FALSE PRETENSES

is up, we shall try to pierce the lines of the Republicans, which cannot be far away. For that you must be fresh, for we may need to be fleet."

"But you?" she broke in quickly. "You are going to sleep too?"

"Undoubtedly," I answered. "Only first I wish to assure myself that there is no house too near us. Good-night, mademoiselle."

"Good-night, my friend," she said, looking up at me with a little tremulous smile full of sorrow and weariness.

I stood a moment gazing down at her, longing to gather her in my arms, as one would a child, and caress and comfort her and hold her so until she fell asleep. But I managed to crush the longing back and turn away to the task which I had set myself.

The thicket crowned a low ridge which stretched between two gentle valleys. That we had left was, as I have said, innocent of human habitation. In the one to the north I fancied I could discern a group of houses, but they were so far away that we need apprehend no danger from them. To the westward, along the ridge, the thicket stretched as far as I could see.

Assured that our hiding-place was as safe as could be hoped for, I made my way back to it and walked softly to the dark figure on the grass. She was lying on her side, her head pillowed on her arm, and as I bent above her to make sure that she was protected from the chill of the night, I knew by her regular breathing that she slept.

THE PATH OF HONOR

That sleep, so peaceful and trusting, consecrated the little glade—hallowed it, transformed it into such a temple that I dared lay me down only upon its margin, as though it were a holy place.

Long I lay staring up at the heavens, wondering if I might indeed hope to win this superb creature; weaving a golden future which we trod arm in arm. To possess her, to have her always at my side, the mistress of my home, the mother of my children—the thought shook me with a delicious trembling. But at last cold reason snatched me down from this empyrean height. I told myself I was a fool, and so turned on my side, closed my eyes resolutely, and in the end sank to sleep.

I awoke with the full sun staring me in the face and sat up with a start to find my companion smiling at me across the little amphitheatre.

“Good-morning, monsieur,” she said.

“Good-morning,” I responded, and rose and went toward her.

In some magical way she had removed the stains of travel; to my eyes she seemed to have stepped but this moment from her bath. A sudden loathing of my own foul and hideous clothing came over me. How, in that guise, could she regard me with anything but disgust?

“Mademoiselle,” I said, “I am ashamed to stand here before you in this clear light, for you are sweet and fresh as the morning, while I——”

“Choose the harder part,” she interrupted, “in order to serve me better.”

“But to be hideous——”

FALSE PRETENSES

"Oh, I do not look at the clothes," she said; "and as for the face——"

"Well," I prompted, "as for the face——"

She stole a glance at me.

"As for the face," she continued, "you will remember that I bathed it last night, monsieur, while I was attempting to revive you, and so it is nearly as attractive as nature made it."

"A poor consolation," I retorted.

"Well," she said, looking at it critically, "I confess I have seen handsomer ones."

"Yes?" I encouraged, as she hesitated.

"But never one I liked better," she added, a heavenly shyness in her eyes.

"Mademoiselle," I said, suddenly taking my courage in my hands, "last night while I was unconscious I dreamed such a beautiful dream. I wonder if it was true?"

She glanced again at me hastily and her cheeks were very red.

"Dreams are never true," she said decidedly. "They go by contraries. You will have to bedaub your face a little before you venture forth again."

"But the dream," I insisted, refusing to be diverted. "Shall I tell you what it was?"

"I have never been interested in dreams," she responded calmly, and brushed from her skirt an imperceptible speck of dust.

"But perhaps this one——"

"Not even this one, I am sure. How long are we to remain here, M. de Tavernay?"

THE PATH OF HONOR

I surrendered in despair before the coldness of her glance.

"You are to remain till evening," I replied. "But I must go at once. My first task will be to get some food. Hunger is an enemy which always returns to the attack no matter how often it is overcome."

"And so is a foe to be respected and appeased rather than despised," she added smiling; "I came across some such observation in a book I was reading not long ago. It had a most amusing old man in it called The Partridge,* who was always hungry."

"I can sympathize with him," I said. "My own stomach feels particularly empty at this moment; I must find something to fill it—and yours, too."

"But I fear for you," she protested. "I wish you would not go. I am sure we can get through the day without starving. I should prefer to try, rather than that you should again run such risks as you did last night."

"Those risks were purely the result of my own folly," I pointed out. "I shall not be such a fool a second time. There is a village down yonder and I shall breakfast at the inn like any other traveller. It was my haste last night which aroused suspicion. Besides," I added, "I doubt

* *The Partridge*.—The book was no doubt "The History of Tom Jones," by Fielding, which had been translated into French some years before.—Translator's note.

FALSE PRETENSES

if any one could follow even me by daylight without my perceiving it. You may have to wait an hour——”

“It will not be hunger which distresses me,” she interrupted earnestly, “but fear for your safety. Let us do without the food.”

“It is true we shouldn’t starve,” I admitted, “but for to-night we must be strong, ready for anything. A fast is bad preparation for the kind of work we have before us. Besides, I must find where we are, how the Republican forces are disposed, and the nearest point at which we may find friends. We must guard against the possibility of blundering haphazard into some trap and so failing at the last moment.”

“You are right, of course,” she agreed instantly, though her face was very pale. “I will wait for you here, and pray for you.”

She gave me her hand and I bent and kissed it with trembling lips.

“There will be no danger,” I assured her again, waved my hand to her and plunged into the thicket.

I made my way through it for some distance before venturing into the open; then, under shelter of a hedge, I hastened down the slope, gained the road and turned my face toward the village. Ten minutes brought me to it—a straggle of sordid houses along each side the road teeming with dirty children and with a slatternly woman leaning in every doorway. There was an inn at either end to catch the traveller going east or west and I entered the first I came to and asked for breakfast.

THE PATH OF HONOR

It was served by a pert and not uncomely maid,—bacon, eggs and creamy biscuits,—and I fell to it with an appetite tempered only by the thought that I must eat alone. There was at the time no other guest, and as the maid seemed very willing to talk, I determined to turn her to account.

"These are delicious biscuits," I began. "I have tasted none so good since I started on this journey."

She dropped me a curtesy, flushing with pleasure.

"Have you come a long journey, monsieur?" she asked.

"What!" I cried. "You still say 'monsieur'! Is it a royalist then with whom I have to deal,—a *ci-devant*,—an aristocrat?"

"A royalist?" she repeated, visibly horrified. "Oh, no; but the habit is an old one."

"Yes," I admitted, "old habits are hard to break; even my tongue slips sometimes."

"Besides," she added, looking at me steadily, "there was about you something which made me hesitate to call you citizen."

It was my time to flush. I found myself unable to meet her clear eyes and covered my confusion clumsily by a laugh which even I perceived did not ring true. If my disguise was so easily penetrated it was time I was getting back to my hiding-place.

"Nonsense!" I retorted. "It is proper to say citizen to any one. And, by the way, citizen, what is the name of this village?"

"What, you don't know!" she cried.

FALSE PRETENSES

"Is that wonderful? It hardly seemed to me a second Paris."

"Yet you come to it!"

"I pass through it because it happens to be in my way; I stop for breakfast—I would wish to stop longer," I added with an expressive glance, "but the Nation needs me."

"Needs you?"

"As she needs every man she can get to stamp out those cursed rebels in Vendée."

"Oh, so it is there you go?" she said, her face clearing. "Yes—you are right. My father went yesterday to join the Blues; our guard marched last night. There is scarcely a man left in the village."

"And now perhaps you will tell me its name," I suggested.

"It is called Dairon."

"And where is the nearest Republican force?"

"There is a small one at Airvault and another at Moncontour; but if it is fighting you are looking for, citizen, you will press on to Thouars."

"How far is Thouars?"

"Four leagues, and this road will lead you there."

"Then it is this road I will take. So there is to be fighting at Thouars?"

"Our officers dined here last night," she explained, "and I heard them talking. It seems that the brigands are gathering at Coulonges and expect to take Thouars. Bah! The Blues will fall upon them, surround them, exterminate them! For do you know what it is that they are planning,

THE PATH OF HONOR

those scoundrels? They are planning to hold a place where that ogre of a Pitt may land his troops upon the sacred soil of France!"

Her eyes were blazing. I sprang to my feet.

"Then I must be off!" I cried. "I can't afford to miss that fun. But first, citizen, can you put me up a lunch for the road—a big one, for I have the devil of an appetite. Ransack your larder—I can pay for it;" and I laid a golden louis on the table. "In the vicinity of an army there is never anything to eat. I shall no doubt meet plenty of poor fellows with nothing in their bellies, and two or three bottles of wine would not be amiss."

"Just so," she nodded, and flew to the kitchen, where I heard her and another woman talking vigorously together to the accompaniment of a clatter of knives and dishes.

I walked to the door and looked down the village street. It was still deserted, save for the women and children. Evidently the men had all been caught in the dragnet of the Blues, or had hurried into hiding for fear they would be drafted to the front. How these poor creatures, left here to their own resources, managed to exist I could not imagine.

"Well, citizen," asked a voice, "how is this?"

I turned to find the maid smiling up at me and in her hand a hamper filled to the brim and covered with a cloth through which the necks of three bottles protruded.

"Excellent!" I cried as I took it. "That will make me welcome, at any rate. A thousand thanks, my dear."

FALSE PRETENSES

"There is one more thing I can do for you," she said. "Your disguise is a poor one, citizen."

"Disguise!" I echoed, my heart in my throat.

"Because the face does not match the clothes," she went on imperturbably. "Any fool could see that these rags do not belong to you. Sit here a moment."

I sat down obediently, not daring to disobey. Whereupon she produced a greasy rag and rubbed it over my face, retiring a step or two from time to time to admire the effect, and then returning to add another touch, much in the manner of an artist engaged upon a masterpiece. At last she was satisfied.

"There," she said, "I defy any one to detect you now. And remember, as long as you wear those rags you are not to wash face or hands. Your business is none of mine, but you are too pretty a fellow to be permitted to run your head into a noose."

"Thank you, my dear!" I said again, and rose and took up my hamper.

She came to me and stood on tiptoe.

"A salute for the Nation, citizen," she said, and kissed me on either cheek. "If you return this way you are to stop here and inquire for Ninette. She will be glad to see you. Adieu—and may the good God have you in His keeping."

I turned westward along the street, unheeding the curious glances cast at me, with a conscience not wholly at peace. I had secured these generous provisions under false pretenses. I had not merited those pure kisses.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE PONIARD AGAIN.

Not until a turn of the road hid me from the village and I was satisfied that I was unobserved did I turn aside and, again sheltering myself behind a friendly hedge, gain the thicket which stretched along the ridge. Then plunging into its cover I hastened back with what speed I could toward the spot where I had left my comrade, uneasily conscious that I had lingered at the inn longer than I had thought to do, for the sun told me that noon had come and gone.

So it was with an anxiety which increased at every step that I broke my way through the underbrush, unheeding the briers which clutched at my clothes and stung hands and face—an anxiety which leaped to mortal anguish as I came out suddenly into the little amphitheatre where I had left her and saw at a glance that it was empty.

I set down the hamper with a groan of agony and wiped the cold sweat from my forehead. Fool!—idiot that I was to leave her unguarded for so long a time! Some one had blundered into our retreat, had discovered her, had taken her prisoner. This thicket doubtless harbored many scoundrels seeking to evade the draft. Perhaps even at this moment——

“Good-day, M. de Tavernay,” called a gay

THE PONIARD AGAIN

voice; and I turned my head mechanically, to see her emerging from the thicket, her face alight. "So you have returned!"

"Thank God!" I cried. "Thank God! You are safe, then!"

"Safe?" she repeated, eyeing me a little curiously. "But certainly! What did you imagine?"

"I feared you had been captured," I answered hoarsely. "Carried away! No matter, since you are safe."

"I heard some one approaching," she explained, still eyeing me, "and decided I would better conceal myself until I was certain it was you. That was wise, wasn't it?"

"Wise? Oh, yes! But I thought I had lost you! I had stayed away so long."

"And in truth," she went on, laughing again, "I am not yet quite certain that it is really you. What a villainous countenance!"

"Yes," I said, flushing. "The—the girl at the inn fixed it for me."

"So!" she cried. "It was a girl that kept you—and pretty, I'll be bound! To think that I have been worrying about you!"

"You must be nearly starved," I said, anxious to change the subject.

"I confess a lively pleasure at the sight of that hamper. May I explore it?"

"At once," I urged, and sat down a little weakly, for I was not yet wholly recovered from the swift reaction from that agony of fear.

She spread upon the grass the cloth with which

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THE PATH OF HONOR

"You actually say that in a tone of despondency!"

"And do you see in it nothing to regret, mademoiselle?"

"To regret? Assuredly not! Shall you regret being in safety?"

"Danger is not the worst thing that can befall a man," I said, "more especially——"

"Well?" she questioned tantalizingly as I hesitated.

I leaned across the cloth and caught her hands and held them prisoner.

"More especially when it is shared by the woman he loves," I continued, throwing discretion to the winds. "Ah, then he forgets the danger, mademoiselle! He remembers only that she is beside him,—that he may look into her eyes as I look into yours,—that he may kiss her hands as I kiss these dear ones. And when he knows that to restore her to her friends is to sever himself from her, he may well despond as he sees the hour approach."

She sat looking at me, the color coming and going in her cheeks, her lips parted, her eyes a little misty. And she made no effort to take her hands away. Ah, what a woman she was! The beauty of her!—the whiteness, the delicacy, the slim grace!—and with it all, a woman's passionate heart, a woman's power of loving and desire of being loved! It was there, I knew, waiting to be awakened, needing only the touch of a certain hand, the sound of a certain voice.

THE PONIARD AGAIN

"You really love me!" she murmured. "You really love me!"

"Oh, my dearest!" I cried. "Can you doubt it? Looking into my eyes, can you doubt it? And last night, looking into yours, I fancied that you swept aside the veil for a moment, and that I saw into your heart, your soul, and read a secret there which made me madly happy! Did I read aright?"

"Not to value your devotion would be indeed ungrateful, monsieur," she answered in a whisper——

"It is not gratitude that I ask," I broke in. "It was not gratitude that I saw! Did I read aright?"

"Suppose I say yes," she said; "what is it you propose?"

"I propose to take you and keep you," I answered madly, drawing her toward me, my blood on fire. "You do love me!—come, confess it! Look into my eyes and tell me! I defy the whole world to take you from me now!"

She swayed toward me for an instant, her lips parted, her eyes swimming in a veil of tears. I had won! I had won! Then she drew her hands away and sat erect, a convulsive shiver running through her.

"And your honor," she asked, her face suddenly white—"what of it? The word you have given—what of it? The vow you have taken—what of it? And if I did love you—do you not see that it is the man of honor that I love? Do you think

THE PATH OF HONOR

I could keep on loving a dishonored man—even though that dishonor were incurred for me? Do you think I could find any place in my heart for a man unfaithful to such a vow as you have taken? No, no!—you cannot believe that!—you cannot so mistake me! I have built a temple for you in my heart—do not tell me that you are unworthy to dwell there!”

I was struck dumb before her. I could find no word of answer. She was right—a hundred times right. And by the trembling which shook her I saw that it was not I alone who suffered.

“Forgive me!” I groaned. “Forgive me!” and I flung myself forward at her feet.

But her arms were about me, and she raised me up and kissed me on the forehead, and her eyes were shining, and her face was very pale.

“Be brave!” she whispered brokenly. “Be brave, my friend! The future will be brighter than you think. Oh, you are worthy to occupy that temple! Oh, I must——”

A sudden rattle of arms and tramp of feet rose to us from the valley.

“What is that?” she asked with bated breath.

I sprang to my feet, went cautiously to the edge of the thicket and looked down. A regiment was marching westward along the road by which we had come—a regiment dusty and travel-stained, with tri-colored cockades in their hats and tri-colored scarfs about their necks. I watched them until they disappeared around a turn of the road. Then I rejoined my comrade.

THE PONIARD AGAIN

"It was a regiment of Blues," I said; "that is bad. I had hoped to take that road. Now we must take the other; but we must keep to the cover of this thicket until we are past the village. We would better be starting now while there is light; then at dusk we can descend to the road and hasten on to Coulonges,"

She was replacing the food in the hamper before I had finished.

"We may need it," she said; "you shall not risk yourself again."

She was entirely self-controlled and turned to me the old, clear, friendly gaze; the emotion which had shaken her a moment before had been conquered and swept aside. What was it she had been about to say? Should I ever know? Should I ever again get past the barrier of her reserve?

I watched her as she slipped my shoes over her own again and fastened them. Then I took up the hamper and started. At the edge of the little glade she paused and threw a kiss back to it.

"Good-by," she called. "Good-by. You also have kept us safely. I shall always remember!"

I dared not look back. I felt that I was forever leaving a spot more dear and sacred than home itself. So I strode blindly on, hurling myself savagely at the underbrush, until the very fury of my exertions served to exhaust the fire which raged within.

"Am I going too fast?" I asked, pausing and turning to her, for her footsteps told me that she was close at my heels.

THE PATH OF HONOR

"No," she said, "but you must be tiring yourself terribly, and to little useful purpose."

"It was the brute fighting itself out," I explained; "exhausting itself by bruising and trampling down those poor little saplings."

"And is it quite exhausted?"

"I trust so. Do you never have an impulse to destroy things—to rend them apart and shatter them to bits?"

"Sometimes," she admitted, laughing. "It's like a thunderstorm, isn't it—all fire and fury while it lasts, but leaving one cleansed and purified. Oh, I am far from perfect," she added, laughing again as she caught my glance, "as you would have seen for yourself long ere this had you been of an observing turn. Is this as far as we go through this thicket?"

"No," I answered, checking the words which rose to my lips; and I set off again, nor paused until the village had sunk from sight behind us. "Now we can rest," I said, and sat down at the edge of the bushes.

She sat beside me and leaned her chin upon her hand as she gazed down into the valley. The sun was sinking to the west and the road seemed the merest yellow ribbon between its green hedges. Far ahead I could see that the country again became more broken, and a low range of purple hills closed in the horizon.

As we sat there silent, a cloud of dust appeared far down the road, and we moved deeper into the cover of the bushes, fearing that it was another

THE PONIARD AGAIN

regiment approaching. But it was only a flock of sheep, driven by three shepherds.

"Food for the enemy," I remarked. "That explains why there are no longer any flocks in these pastures. The Republic has swallowed them, as it has swallowed so many other things."

We watched them until they passed from sight on the horizon behind a cloud of dust which rose and rose until it covered the sun's face.

"Yonder behind that cloud lies Thouars," I said.

"And a league beyond is Coulonges—and our friends," she added.

"Always thinking of that!" I rejoined bitterly.

"Yes—of safety and home. How I shall delight to be there again!"

"Home! And I do not even know where that is! Why is it, mademoiselle, that you have told me nothing of yourself? Do you mistrust me?"

"Mistrust you?" she repeated. "What an absurd question! But there is so little to tell."

"And you refuse to tell me even that? I know nothing of you except your name. How am I to find you again, if fate is indeed kind to me? Where am I to look for you?"

"A perfect lover would have trusted his heart to lead him," she retorted. "But since you do not, you may as well know that the Château de Chambray is two leagues south of Poitiers."

"Then," I said, "I shall not have far to go if—if—pray heaven it may be my fortune to seek you there."

CHAPTER XXIII.

FORTUNE FROWNS.

WE gained the road again and turned westward along it, walking for some time in silence. I confess I was in bad humor. I was not altruist enough to burden myself willingly with that hamper, and more than once I was tempted to fling it into the ditch at the roadside, especially as minute followed minute and no house appeared. But at last at a turn of the road we came upon a miserable hovel supported by a pile of stone, without which it must inevitably have collapsed. I thought for an instant that the hut was empty, but as we drew near a child's thin wail came to us through the open door. I set the hamper down, knocked and passed on, and I doubt not that in that family there still survives the legend of a heavenly visitation.

My spirit cleared after that, perhaps as the reward of a good action, perhaps because I was rid of the hamper; at any rate, I could lift my head and look about me and take joy in the beauty of the night. There were only the stars to light us, for the moon had not yet risen. They looked down upon us from the high heavens, and it seemed to me that there was kindness and sympathy in their gaze—that they blessed us and wished us well. The road was much smoother than the one we had traversed the night before,

FORTUNE FROWNS

and we got forward at a speed which warranted our reaching Coulonges in good time if nothing happened to delay us. We were both well rested and I already had good reason to know and wonder at my companion's powers of endurance.

I glanced down at her and saw that she was staring straight ahead at the road unrolling before us. How near we were to the moment of parting! With every step we approached the place where I must leave her. Even should I survive my pilgrimage of vengeance, it seemed most unlikely that I should see her again—certainly we should never be thrown together in this sweet, intimate, personal relation. And would I wish to see her in any other way? To gaze at her from a distance, to find her fenced about, to stand silent while some other gallant whispered in her ear—would not all that be as the rubbing of salt into an open wound?

Indeed she had already applied that torture with that mocking invitation to Chambray. Why was it that I had so failed to touch a responsive chord in her? Or rather why, at the very moment I fancied I had touched it, should she draw back and deal me a cruel blow? Perhaps she fancied there was kindness in this cruelty; perhaps she was trying to save me from sinking too deeply into the quicksand which entangled me. Alas! I felt that I was already past all hope of rescue. So a real kindness would have been to make my last moments as happy as might be ere the sands closed over me and divided us forever!

THE PATH OF HONOR

I shook the thought away. Nothing on earth should so divide us. Honor compelled no man to wreck his life beyond redemption. But as I turned the problem over in my mind, I confess my heart sank. So long as Mlle. de Benseval lived, just so long was I bound to her. That was the final statement to which the tangle reduced itself, and I reflected bitterly upon the folly of parents who disposed of their children without asking their consent, or indeed before they were old enough to know to what they were consenting. A boy of ten will blithely promise to marry any one, or will bind himself indifferently with a vow of celibacy, for what does he know of either? Only when he comes to look at the world and the women in it with a man's eyes does he understand.

"What is it, Sir Sorrowful?" asked my companion at last. "The old problem?"

"The old problem."

"Why ponder it? You have already said that no man can escape his destiny."

"I am going to escape mine if it be possible."

"Is escape worth so much worry?"

"It is all the difference between hell and heaven!"

"Oh, fie! What would the betrothed think could she hear you?"

"I wish she could!" I retorted bitterly.

"Ah, M. de Tavernay," and her voice had a note of sadness in it, "I thought you a gallant man. I thought you brave enough to approach your fate with a smile upon your lips. I thought

FORTUNE FROWNS

you generous enough to make this girl who is waiting for you believe that you really loved her. Consider how much more difficult is her task. Perhaps she remembers you only as a thoughtless and unattractive boy; perhaps she also has seen some one whom she fancies she could love better; perhaps it is some one who is really better worth loving. Yet she is awaiting you, stifling her misgivings in her bosom, ready to keep her oath, although an oath is not the same thing to a woman as to a man. Nor is marriage the same thing. To a man it is an episode; to a woman it is her whole life. She belongs to the man she has married. Do you think the woman to whom you are betrothed does not realize all this? Be sure she does—and trembles at it. And you propose to make her task more difficult still. You will come to her with a sour and downcast face; you will say to her as plainly as if you spoke the words, ‘I do not love you; I take you because I must. If I were free I would not look at you a second time; I am making a martyr of myself by marrying you.’ Which do you think will be the greater martyr, monsieur, you or she? You are right in your estimate of yourself—you are wholly selfish.”

I had listened with bowed head and quivering nerves. Every word burnt into me as a white-hot iron.

“You are right,” I said hoarsely, when she had finished. “I am a coward—a cur. I am not really a man of honor.”

“You are only a boy,” she said; and her tone

THE PATH OF HONOR

was more tender. "You have been too long in your mother's leading-strings. But you have in you the making of a man, my friend, and I know that I shall live to be proud of you."

I caught her hand and kissed it—a kiss not of love but of gratitude. I swear that at that moment passion was as dead in me as though it had never been.

We went on in silence after that. I had my bitter draught to swallow, and swallow it I did without flinching, for all pretty euphemism had been stripped away.

"Mademoiselle," I said at last, "I hope that in time you will pardon me. And I thank you from the bottom of my heart that you had the courage to speak as you did just now. It was the only way to open my eyes to my real self. Believe me, I shall be brave enough to look at it steadily."

She held out her hand with a quick gesture.

"I am sure you will," she said very softly. "And let me tell you one thing more: I shall always be a better woman for having known you."

Again I kissed her hand,—humbly as a slave might,—and again we went on in silence. The moon rose and threw our shadows far before us along the road. We came at last to the rough and uneven ground I had seen from the hillside, and here we found the way more difficult, for the road grew narrow and uneven, with high untrimmed hedges closing it in on either hand and sometimes even meeting overhead, so that we seemed to be stumbling forward in a tunnel into

FORTUNE FROWNS

which no ray of light could penetrate. I aided her as well as I could, but even then it was disheartening and exhausting work.

"We must rest," I said; "we must rest;" and I led her to a seat in the shadow of the hedge.

"I shall recover in a moment," she protested. "We must reach Coulonges to-night. I have set my heart on it. Remember, we burnt our ships behind us when we abandoned our provisions."

"We shall reach Coulonges," I said confidently. "At the next house I will inquire the way."

"Come," she said, starting to her feet. "Let us go. I am quite rested."

She was a few paces ahead of me, and I let her keep the place for a moment that I might admire her erect and graceful figure, when suddenly she shrank back against me with a little cry of fright.

"What is it?" I asked. "You are not hurt?"

"No, no," she whispered; "but yonder—creep forward and look."

There was a sharp turn in the road and as I went forward cautiously and looked around it my heart stood still. For there, not two hundred yards distant, was encamped a regiment of infantry—the same perhaps that we had seen pass that afternoon. I contemplated the camp in silence for a moment, noting how it lay in the little valley, then I drew back and rejoined my comrade.

"There is no danger," I said. "We must make a wide detour and avoid these fellows."

I searched along the hedge until I found a place

THE PATH OF HONOR

where I could break through, and in a moment we were together in the field on the other side. Cautiously we crept away up the hillside until the lights of the camp gleamed faint behind us; then we went forward past them. There was no danger of our being seen, despite the brightness of the moonlight, for the field was full of sheep—the same we had seen pass, no doubt—and at a distance, so low we crept, we could not be distinguished from them. We came to another hedge and broke a passage through it, and I was just turning back toward the road when a low moan behind me brought me sharp around.

“What is it?” I asked again, and stretched out my arms and caught her, or she would have fallen.

“My ankle,” she gasped, her lips white to the very edge. “I turned it back yonder. I thought I could walk on it but—oh!” and she shivered and hid her face against my shoulder.

I placed her gently on the ground and with trembling fingers undid the laces of her shoe. She shivered again with agony at my touch and closed her eyes. I felt that the ankle was already swelling, and the sweat poured down my face as I realized what anguish she was in.

“I must get aid,” I said thickly. “I must get you to some house.”

She was clutching wildly at my sleeve, her face convulsed, her eyes bright with suffering.

“Leave me,” she said, pulling me down to her. “Leave me. It is no more than I deserve. Save

FORTUNE FROWNS

yourself. Only," she added softly, "kiss me first."

For answer, I bent and lifted her tenderly in my arms, pressed her close against my heart and kissed her quivering lips, her shining eyes, and fragrant hair.

"I love you," I whispered—"more than ever I love you! Oh, I shall never be able to tell you how I love you!"

She clung to me desperately, and I held her close—close—trembling with a great happiness.

"Tell me," I whispered; "I know it now—but tell me!"

She lifted her face to mine, no longer pinched with suffering, but radiant with joy.

"I love you!" she said. "Oh, why should I deny it?"

Again I kissed her; then I set off down the hill, while she dropped her head upon my shoulder and sobbed silently—but I knew that it was not with pain. She was mine—mine! Nothing could alter that! Not all the oaths of heaven and hell could alter that! Not the scorn of the living nor the memory of the dead could alter that! I had happiness within my hand and I would hold it fast; there should be no paltering with it, no looking back, no question of this or that. How foolish all such questions seemed, now that the die was cast!

At last I reached the road and for an instant hesitated, looking up and down. To ask aid of the Blues would be to court the guillotine, and yet

THE PATH OF HONOR

I might blunder along the road for hours without coming to a house where help could be secured. Had I the right to condemn her to that suffering? Then I remembered Goujon. Better a sprained ankle than that infamy—better any suffering than that! And resolutely I set my face westward.

"It will not be long," I whispered. "We shall find a house. Be brave! Remember only that I love you!"

She answered with a pressure of her arms about my neck, and I went on with new strength, my heart singing. At last, with a deep breath of thankfulness, I discerned the roof of a cottage rising above the hedge to the right. Was it occupied? There was no light at the window nor smoke rising from the chimney, but I hastened forward to its door and knocked. There was no response. I tried the door and found it barred, so I knocked again, or rather hammered savagely with my fist. This time a step approached.

"Be off!" cried a harsh voice. "No entrance here."

"Citizen," I said as mildly as I could, "I ask your aid—you will lose nothing by opening the door."

"Be off!" he cried again. "I will not open."

"Well then I shall kick it in," I said, letting my wrath burst forth, "and shoot you down like the dog you are. Choose—a gold louis if you aid me, death if you refuse!" and I gave the door a premonitory kick which made the flimsy building tremble. "Come, is it war or peace?"

FORTUNE FROWNS

"What is it you require, citizen?" asked the voice after a moment in a milder tone.

"Some water boiling hot and cloth for a bandage."

"And for these you will give a gold louis?"

"I promise it."

"Very well, I will open the door."

"You will make a light first," I said; and placing my burden carefully on the ground in the shadow of the hedge I drew my pistol and assured myself that it was ready. "Come, make haste," I added.

In a moment a light sprang up within and the door slowly opened. I crossed the threshold with a bound, to find myself face to face with as villainous a wretch as I had ever encountered. A great shock of yellow hair hung over a face so grimed and crusted with filth that the features were almost indecipherable. The head hung forward, and the great hands dangling below the knees showed that the man was deformed.

"Quick! stir up the fire," I commanded, "and heat the water."

"And the gold louis?" he asked, eyeing my dress.

I drew it forth and placed it on a rude table which stood in one corner.

"There it is," I said; "but it is not yours yet."

His eyes gleamed as he looked at it and he licked his lips as a dog might have done at sight of a savory bone; then he turned to the hearth, stirred the smoldering embers, threw some pieces

THE PATH OF HONOR

of wood upon them, filled an earthenware pot from another vessel which stood on the hearth, and placed it in the midst of the flames.

"Your water will be ready in three winks, citizen," he said.

"Good!" and I moved before the fire a bench which served as a chair. "Now I will bring in my companion."

"Your companion?" he repeated, looking about with a snarl.

"Yes—and if you touch the gold-piece I will kill you. Sit down in yonder corner."

He backed into the corner indicated and sat down, staring vacantly. In an instant I was outside, and lifting my comrade tenderly in my arms, bore her back into the cottage and closed and barred the door.

"Sit here, my love," I said, and placed her on the bench. "Now, let us see the ankle."

I knelt before her and with fingers which trembled so that I could scarcely guide them removed the shoe and cut away the stocking. The ankle,—which should have been so slim, so graceful,—was cruelly swollen.

"It will be better in a moment," I said, and dipping the remnant of the stocking into the steaming water, held it close against the hurt.

"Oh, that is heavenly!" she murmured, and breathed a deep sigh of relief.

I bathed the ankle thoroughly, immersing it in water almost scalding, and every instant I joyed

FORTUNE FROWNS

to see the lines of pain in her face soften and disappear.

"And now," I said at last, "we will bandage it tightly and it will not pain you—only of course you cannot use it for some days."

"For some days!" she echoed in dismay. "But we cannot stay here so long a time."

"No," I agreed, "certainly not—but first let us bandage the ankle."

But my face fell as I glanced about the room.

"What do you require for a bandage?" she asked, following my eyes.

"A strip of clean cloth—the longer the better. But clean cloth in a hovel like this!"

She colored slightly as she looked down at me.

"If you will turn your back for a moment," she said, "I think I can supply the bandage."

I walked over to the corner where our involuntary host still squatted, cursing softly to himself, and stood before him. There was a sharp rip.

"How is this, doctor?" asked a voice; and I turned to see her holding out to me a strip of linen.

"Excellent!" I cried; and kneeling before her, I drew it tightly around the ankle. I rejoiced to see that the swelling had already decreased considerably, and I bent and kissed the little foot.

"Is that a portion of the treatment?" she asked, laughing.

"A very necessary portion—don't you feel the improvement?"

THE PATH OF HONOR

"Yes," she said, her eyes dancing, "I believe I do."

"And now," I added, standing up again, "we must get out of this. We are still too near that camp down yonder."

"But I am such a burden!" she protested.

"A dear, delightful burden;" and I stooped to raise her. But at that instant a violent blow sounded on the door.

"Open!" cried a voice. "Open!"

There was no time to temporize; besides, I knew that to hesitate would be to double any suspicion we might awaken.

"At once!" I answered. "Be brave, my love!" I whispered, and kissed her lips. As I turned away I saw the brute in the corner spring upon the gold-piece and hide it among his rags.

"Open!" cried the voice again; and the door shook under a savage blow.

I strode to it and flung it wide.

A flash of arms greeted my eyes, a vision of fierce faces. In an instant a dozen men came crowding into the room, and I saw that they wore the uniform of the Republic.



I STRODE TO THE DOOR AND FLUNG IT WIDE



CHAPTER XXIV.

THE DRAGON'S DEN.

THE rush of the intruders, sudden and overwhelming, drove me back from the door, but I managed to hold my place, pistol in hand, before my love, too dazed for the moment to do aught but stare at them and curse the fortune which had brought us to this desperate pass. But I had a part to play,—a part I had rehearsed more than once for an emergency just such as this,—and I got my wits back by a supreme effort, while the newcomers still stood gaping in a semicircle about us.

"Well, citizens," I said, trying to achieve a smile, "one would have thought you were taking a fortress by assault."

"We were set to patrol this road," explained one of them. "We saw this light and determined to find out what was going forward here."

I saw by their awkwardness and want of discipline that they were not trained soldiery, but raw levies with no clear idea of their duties; and my spirits rose.

"Quite right," I commended, smiling this time in earnest. "I suspected as much. That is why I opened so promptly, since we have nothing to conceal. There is no enemy of the Republic here—only this honest old fellow, this woman and

THE PATH OF HONOR

myself. So farewell, my friends. Oblige me by using this to drink the health of the Nation;" and I tossed their spokesman a silver crown.

A murmur of satisfaction ran around the group, and such is the power of self-assurance, that three or four of them made a motion to withdraw. But their spokesman, evidently the most intelligent among them, lingered.

"I fear we must require some account of you, citizen," he said, looking at me apologetically, "and above all of your companion, who appears to me to be an aristocrat."

"An aristocrat!" I laughed, realizing in a flash that in these circumstances I must take some other line than that I had originally resolved on. "So it seems you cannot tell maid from mistress! She is so little of an aristocrat that she hopes to be *vivandière* to the regiment which I join."

"Then, *pardieu*, you must join ours!" cried one of the rogues, and pressed toward her. "Hey, my dear, look at us—we're a likely set of fellows. We'll be kind to you—we'll do our best to make you happy;" at which his comrades laughed approvingly and gazed at my companion with meaning glances.

"We are already pledged to a regiment at Thouars, citizen," I protested, pushing him back good-naturedly, though there was red murder in my heart.

"Her clothing is not that of a servant," said another, staring at her.

"Well, may not a maid don her mistress's

THE DRAGON'S DEN

gown?" I demanded. "Especially when she is leaving her for the last time?"

They laughed again at that, but I saw that suspicion had been aroused—faint indeed, but enough to imperil us. Any but these country louts would have seen through the lie at once—that peerless creature a servant, indeed!

"What is your business here, citizen?" queried the first speaker after a moment's silence during which I noted with uneasiness that none of them made any movement to retire.

"We stopped here to rest," I explained. "My comrade has injured her ankle. We will spend the night here, since it is impossible for her to go farther. Your regiment passes here?"

"Undoubtedly, since it also goes to Thouars."

"Well, we will join it as it passes. Perhaps you will give us breakfast and permit my comrade to ride in one of the wagons."

"Undoubtedly, citizen," chimed in another with a laugh; "but we'll not permit any such scarecrow as you to ride with her. You'd prefer a handsome soldier, wouldn't you, my dear?"

"As you will," I agreed, laughing too, though with no small effort; "but you see how pale she is—she suffers greatly. A night's rest will change all that. So good-night, citizens; till to-morrow."

This time they appeared really satisfied and started for the door in a body. But a sudden uproar from without stopped them.

"Name of a dog!" yelled a hoarse voice.

THE PATH OF HONOR

"Where are those blockheads? Ah, they shall hang for this! Deserters! Traitors!"

There was an uneasy movement among the men. I saw that they had reason to know and fear that voice. In another instant a ferocious face appeared in the doorway, its eyes gleaming with rage.

"What!" it cried; and I saw a sword gleam in the air and descend with no uncertain force on heads and shoulders. "Dallying here with a light-o'-love! Is it thus you do your duty? Is it thus you serve the Nation? Hounds! Curs! I'll show you!" and he drove them forth pell-mell into the road. "And who are you, citizen?" he demanded, wheeling upon me when the last of them had disappeared.

"I am on my way to join the army at Thouars," I said.

"And she?" and he jerked his thumb toward my companion.

"Spoil of war," I explained with a wide smile, seeing he was too wise to swallow the other story.

He turned and stared at her for a moment.

"My word, you have a pretty taste, citizen," he said; and his eye gleamed lasciviously. "I think I will release you, my dear, from this dirty brute," he added to her with a leer he no doubt thought engaging. "You'd rather have a brave fellow like myself, wouldn't you? Say, wouldn't you?" and he approached and tweaked her ear. "Of course you would! So it is settled."

"Citizen," I interposed, "I shall have a word to say to that. She belongs to me."

THE DRAGON'S DEN

He turned upon me a disdainful countenance.

"Get out, you beast!" he said. "Don't you see we wish to be relieved of you? You say you are going to Thouars. Well, the door is open. Suppose you start now."

"When I start my prisoner goes with me," I said.

He stared at me for a moment as though scarcely able to believe his ears.

"What!" he shouted. "You dispute with me! You—you scum! You insect! You toad! I tell you to get out! I advise you to get out while you are able to use your legs."

"Pah!" I retorted, rage mastering me. "Save your ass's voice for those cowards out yonder. I'm not afraid of noise!"

"Dog!" he yelled, and sprang upon me.

But I had my pistol out—it was his life or mine—and fired straight into that savage countenance. I saw the gaping hole the bullet left; I saw the blood spurt from it as he pitched forward at my feet. Then a score of savage hands seized me, and I thought for an instant that I should be torn asunder. But a mounted patrol, summoned by the shot, cantered up, cut their way through the crowd, and jerked me out of its clutches.

"What is all this?" demanded their officer.

In two words they told him the story, pointing to the body on the floor and to the girl cowering in one corner, her hands before her face. They ended by demanding that I be hanged forthwith.

"Oh, he shall hang!" my new captor assured

THE PATH OF HONOR

them. "Rest content. But he may be a spy; and first we'll see what he knows. Tie his hands."

They were secured behind my back in a twinkling.

"Bring the woman too," he said; and one of them brought her forth and threw her across a horse. I saw with a sigh of relief that she had fainted. "Give me your rope, Couthon," he added to one of his men.

The rope was a strong yet slender line. Already in one end of it there was a running noose, and I shuddered as I guessed its meaning. He threw the noose over my head, drew it tight about my neck and made the other end fast to a ring in his saddle.

"Release him," he commanded, with an evil laugh. "He can't get away. Forward!"

For an instant the thought flashed through my brain that I would end it here, that I would let myself be dragged under the hoofs of the horses. Then, as a trooper cantered by me bearing a limp form before him, I realized my cowardice. So long as a breath of life remained I must fight to save her from the hideous fate which threatened her.

So I ran along in the dust beside my captor in such an agony of rage and despair as I had never known. If a wish of mine could have engulfed the world in ruin I would instantly have uttered it. I prayed for an earthquake to swallow us, for a thunderbolt to blast us. I looked up at the clear

THE DRAGON'S DEN

sky and cursed it. So this was the end—for me, death by the rope—for her . . .

The lights of the camp gleamed ahead. In a moment we passed the outpost and approached a tent before which a sentry was stationed.

"Announce to Citizen Goujon," said my captor, reining in his horse, "that we have here two traitors to be judged."

The sentry saluted and disappeared into the tent. As for me, my heart had stopped at the mention of that name. Goujon! Was he to prove my murderer, too? And Charlotte—

"Enter, citizen," said the sentry, holding back the flap of the tent.

My captor threw himself from the saddle and led me into the tent, the rope still about my neck. Another followed carrying Charlotte.

Within the tent was a table upon which two candles gleamed. Before it sat a man examining a pile of papers. He looked up as we entered, and I shuddered as I met his eyes; for they seemed a snake's eyes, so veiled and cold and venomous they were. The face was pock-marked, clammy-grey, and the nose so fissured and swollen that it had the appearance of a sponge.

He glanced from me to the burden which the trooper bore, and a slow flush crept into his cheeks.

"Well?" he asked, sharply, turning back to my captor.

And again I had the pleasure of listening to the highly-colored story of my recent exploit. I was a murderer, a traitor—undoubtedly an aristo-

THE PATH OF HONOR

crat. I had shot down in cold blood the officer who was interrogating me. I was plainly a desperate character and should be hanged before I had further opportunity for evil.

"But before hanging him," my captor concluded, "I thought it best to bring him to you for interrogation. He may be a spy."

Goujon nodded.

"You were right," he said. "Receive my compliments. Tie him to that pole yonder. As for the woman, place her on my cot,—we shall find means to revive her;" and he laughed menacingly. "You may retire," he added, "but stay within call."

They saluted and withdrew.

Goujon waited until the flap fell behind them. Then he approached me slowly, until he was quite near, and contemplated me with those snake's eyes of his—my face, my clothes, my shoes. With a little smile of enjoyment he turned away and bent above the cot, his hands clasped behind him. At last he turned to the table, took up a candle and held the flame close to her lips. It flickered back and forth, and he set it down again with a chuckle of satisfaction.

Then he came back to me and stood for a moment gloating over me.

"So, Citizen Tavernay," he said at last with an infernal smile, "you did not escape after all!"

CHAPTER XXV.

IN THE SHADOW.

"So, Citizen Tavernay," he repeated, dwelling on the words with a malicious triumph, "you did not escape after all—you and yonder pretty aristocrat. God's blood! but this is a pleasant moment!"

He stopped and looked into my eyes, then burst into a roar of laughter.

"For me, I mean!" he cried, holding his sides. "For me—not for you. Come—look at it from my standpoint. Be large-minded enough to look at it from my standpoint. Could anything have been more perfect, more complete, more admirable in every way? It tempts me almost to believe in Providence."

I could only stand and stare at him and wonder numbly whether he were man or devil.

"You wonder how I know you?" he continued. "True, I have never before had the supreme pleasure of meeting you thus, face to face, and of conversing pleasantly with you as I am now doing; but I know you perfectly nevertheless. The Nation has a sharp eye for its enemies, and it never sleeps. That eye has been upon you from the moment of your flight."

But I had shaken off my stupor and got something of my boldness back.

THE PATH OF HONOR

"Nonsense!" I said contemptuously. "I am not fleeing. I am on my way to join the forces at Thouars. You mistake me for some one else."

He looked at me and nodded, while his smile grew and broadened.

"Not bad," he commended; "but it is useless to lie. Even if you were not Tavernay, your fate is none the less assured. I can well understand your reluctance to part with life;" and he cast a leering glance toward the still form on the cot. "You must have found life very pleasant recently. But do not despond. You are leaving your mistress in tender hands. She will not want for affection."

"What is the charge against me?" I demanded, controlling as well as I could the wrath which devoured me.

"The charge?" he repeated negligently. "Oh, I do not know—there are a dozen charges. I have not yet determined which I shall use. But what does it matter? Between ourselves, I will tell you, citizen, that I have decided upon your death because you are in the way;" and again his eyes wandered to that still figure.

"You would, then," I said, realizing that I must keep my calmness, "murder a patriot in order to be more free to wrong a woman?"

"A patriot?" he sneered. "Perhaps not—but I would murder an aristocrat for far less cause than that."

"I am not an aristocrat," I protested desperately.

IN THE SHADOW

"So you persist in that farce?" he queried coldly. "Really, you grow wearisome. Perhaps you will explain then how you happen to be wearing the clothing of that traitor, Padeloup?"

My tongue refused to answer, and he laughed again as he noted my confusion.

"I recognize it, every stitch," he went on evenly; "every stitch except the shoes. And I even think I can guess where you got those. More than that, I can have you identified in a moment. Perhaps you remember Sergeant Dubosq, whom you encountered on the road from Tours. I am sure that he will recall you readily, even in this guise, for he has an excellent memory. Shall I summon him?"

I saw that it was useless to persist.

"No," I answered; "don't disturb the sergeant."

"You admit then that you are Tavernay?"

"Yes," I answered boldly; "why not? I have committed no crime——"

"You have opposed the Nation."

"In what way? By trying to escape?"

"You have abetted the Nation's enemies."

"By accepting their hospitality? That is childish!"

"You have murdered two patriots," he went on inexorably.

"Two?" I repeated with a start.

"One you stabbed last night."

"It was his life or mine."

"The other you shot a few moments ago."

THE PATH OF HONOR

"To defend a woman's honor."

A sudden light blazed in his eyes.

"You pretend it still exists?" he sneered.

I gave him a look, which, had looks that power, would have scorched and shrivelled him where he stood. But instead of shrinking he came very close to me and stared into my eyes, a fiendish grin upon his lips.

"Really, Citizen Tavernay," he said at last, "it would appear from your countenance that this surprising thing is true; and yet I can scarcely believe it. Have you taken a vow? Are you—but no matter. I thank you, my friend, for your forbearance. I applaud your virtue, which is really unique even in this age of virtue. Nevertheless you must agree with me that your death is more than ever necessary. Indeed I find you already one too many!" and he glanced toward the cot with a meaning unmistakable.

"What a brute!" I murmured, contempt mastering every other emotion. **"What a brute! This is your whole life, then! You think of nothing but vileness. I might have guessed as much by looking at you! But one victim has already escaped you——"**

"Yes," he broke in, his face suddenly contorted with rage; **"and the wretch who fired that shot is burning in hell for it!"**

"She died in her husband's arms," I continued, seeing how the words stung him, **"happy, his lips on hers. Of you she had never so much as heard the name. During her whole life not once did she**

IN THE SHADOW

so much as think of you. For her you have never existed—never will exist! She has escaped you!”

“Go on!” he said hoarsely, licking his lips with a purple tongue. “Body of God! Go on!”

His face was convulsed with anguish, great drops of sweat stood out across his forehead; he was quivering under the blows I dealt him, and yet he seemed to get a kind of fearful pleasure from them. And in that instant I saw how he had been consumed by a hopeless passion; how he had beaten himself against a lofty wall which he could never hope to scale; how he was at this moment eating his heart out—and I might have found it in my soul to pity him, if I had not so loathed and hated him for the evil it was still in his power to do.

“Go on!” he repeated savagely. “What more?”

“Nothing more,” I answered, “except that your second victim will escape you even as the other. God protects His angels!”

“Pah!” he yelled, his wrath bursting forth like a whirlwind. “I will show you how He protects them;” and he sprang toward the cot like a wild beast.

A blind fury seized me—a fury maddening, uncontrollable. I saw red—literally and actually I saw red, as though the world had been suddenly drenched with blood. I strained at the cord about my wrists until it cut deep into the flesh; I hurled myself toward him, only to be jerked back cruelly by the noose about my neck. I cursed him till

THE PATH OF HONOR

I could curse no longer; I offered my soul's hope of eternity for a single moment's freedom.

Then suddenly I realized my impotence; a great calm fell upon me. I stopped and looked at him. He had left the cot and come back to me, bringing a candle with him in order to see more clearly, and he stood there regarding me with the air of a connoisseur.

"Well, citizen," he asked with a diabolical smile, "have you finished? If you care to begin again, pray do so, for it is very amusing. If not, I fear I shall have to bid you adieu. After all, one must prosecute his loves in private."

A long sigh from the cot interrupted him; he turned with a start, holding the candle above his head. In an instant I saw my chance; I drew up my leg and kicked him savagely with all my strength, full in the belly.

He went back and down with one terrible yell and lay writhing upon the floor. Again I tore wildly at my bonds, but the flap of the tent was dashed aside, and the guard rushed in.

Goujon sat upright with an effort, swaying from side to side.

"String him up!" he yelled, his lips white with froth like a mad dog's. "Hang him! Out with him this instant! An aristocrat and a traitor!" The words rose to a scream of agony. "Oh, he has killed me!" he groaned, and fell forward upon his face.

"God grant it!" I murmured. "Oh, God grant it!"

IN THE SHADOW

Already their hands were upon me, dragging me away.

"Tavernay!" screamed a voice. "Tavernay! Oh, my love!" and I turned my head to see Charlotte starting from the cot, her hands outstretched.

For an instant I shook them off; then they closed about me and hurled me from the tent. I fancied that death was upon me then and there, so merciless were the blows they dealt me. By some miracle I managed to keep my feet, and suddenly a gigantic figure drove itself through the crowd like a catapult.

"Murderers!" he shrieked. "Assassins!" and I heard the blows which sent them to right and left. "What!" he continued, taking his stand before me. "You would kill a defenseless man—twenty against one! What sort of cowards are you?"

"He is an aristocrat," broke in the man who held my halter. "Citizen Goujon has ordered that he be hanged."

"Hang him and welcome," rejoined the newcomer; "but don't let me catch you worrying him like dogs. Now off with you!"

The voice sounded strangely familiar in my ears, and when I had shaken the blood from my eyes, I saw that my rescuer was Dubosq.

"Many thanks, my friend," I said; and he started round astonished. "It seems you do not know me," I added, as he stared his bewilderment,

THE PATH OF HONOR

"and yet it was only three days ago that we met on the road from Tours."

He seized a torch from the hand of a bystander and flashed it into my face.

"My word, citizen!" he cried. "Small wonder! You looked like a bridegroom, then—and now—What have you been doing with yourself?"

"I have been trying to escape being murdered," I rejoined. "And it seems that I am not going to escape after all."

"Oh, yes, you will," he corrected; "you shall not be murdered, I will see to that—only prettily executed."

"There is a difference, then?" I questioned, with irony.

"All the difference in the world," he answered with conviction. "The one is irregular and apt to be bungled; it is done without authority and without method, and is often needlessly prolonged. The other is carefully planned and quickly carried out; all unpleasantness is avoided——"

"Oh, it is!" I broke in with a little laugh. "I am glad to know that!"

"Citizen, you surprise me!" protested Dubosq; and I saw that he was in earnest. "I thought you more of a philosopher. Since this is the end, why worry about it?"

"I will try not to," I said; "but at twenty-one the end comes rather early."

"True," he agreed, and gazed at me contemptively; "I had forgot that you were so young."

"At any rate, I thank you for your interest," I said.

IN THE SHADOW

"Perhaps it is misplaced;" and he looked at me, frowning heavily. "So you were an accomplice of the *ci-devant* Favras, after all. You lied very prettily that morning, citizen—and I would have sworn that you were fresh from the nursery. That's one on old Dubosq."

"Not in the least," I protested. "I did not lie—I had never seen Favras before. He took my horse by force, as I related to you; but I found him awaiting me at the next town. He restored my horse to me and insisted that I spend the night at his château."

"Faith, citizen," said Dubosq with a laugh, "you'd better have lost your horse and spent the night under a hedge. As it is, you lose your life and enter the eternal night."

"Yes; there's no help for that, I suppose?"

"Not if Citizen Goujon has ordered it."

"He did order it," broke in one of my persecutors, who had listened to all this with ill-concealed impatience, "and at once."

"Very well, comrade," said Dubosq; "come along, then. But he didn't order you to torture this fellow, and, *pardieu*, I'll see that you don't. If you have any message, Citizen—I've forgotten your name."

"Tavernay," I prompted.

"Oh, yes; I remember. Well, if you have any messages, Citizen Tavernay, I'll be glad to take charge of them. It's the only kindness I can do you, I'm afraid."

"Thanks, my friend," I answered, tears in my eyes at this unexpected favor. "If you could

THE PATH OF HONOR

convey news of my death to my mother at Beaufort——”

“Consider it done,” he broke in. “Anything else?”

“Citizen,” I said, lowering my voice, “for myself I do not greatly care. But I had a companion—a pure and beautiful woman. If you can save her from death, or worse, you will be doing a noble action.”

Dubosq pulled his great mustaches thoughtfully.

“Is she an aristocrat?” he asked at last.

“Not at all,” I hastened to assure him. “She was merely a guest at the château like myself.”

“I will see what can be done,” he promised; “but it will be no easy task.”

“I know it, my friend; therefore I ask it of you.”

“Come, Citizen Tavernay,” he said, raising his head suddenly, “I can pledge you one thing.”

“And that?”

“That she has nothing worse to fear than death.”

“God bless you!” I said with trembling lips.

“God bless you! Now I can die in peace.”

“Do you know, citizen,” said Dubosq in a voice almost tender, “I regret more and more that you did not accept my invitation to join us that morning, for, by my soul, you are a gallant fellow!”

We had reached a small oak which grew upon the hillside, and one end of the line was thrown over a lower branch.

IN THE SHADOW

"One minute to shrive yourself, citizen," called a rude voice.

I looked out over the hillside. The moon was sailing high in the heavens, and I noticed that the flock of sheep was moving down toward us. Just above us was the line of sentinels, and the fires of the camp gleamed along the road below. I could see the soldiers crowded about them, for the night was chill; could hear their jests and laughter. The tragedy which was enacting here on the hillside, and which meant so much to me, concerned them not at all. They would go their way, the world would wag along, only I would no longer be a part of it. My mother—this would be her death, too—the death of all her hopes, all her ambitions. She would have nothing more to live for. I wondered what she was doing at this moment. Did some message of the spirit warn her that her only son was in deadly peril? Another woman would miss me—but aside from these my disappearance would be scarce noted. It would create not even a ripple on the great ocean of the world. My life would count for nothing.

I thought of all this, and more, which I cannot set down here—and commended my soul to God. So this was the end! How little I had foreseen it when I had ridden so bravely out from Beaufort! How deeply I had lived in those three days! They seemed to count more than all the rest of my life——

"The time is up, citizen!" called the same rude voice.

THE PATH OF HONOR

Dubosq was at my side.

"Courage!" he whispered. "It is soon over!"

"Adieu, my friend," I said. "Remember your promise."

"I do remember it. Trust me."

I raised my head. At least I would die worthily.

"God and the King!" I shouted. "Death to the Na——"

There came a sharp pain at my throat——

Then, as though I had uttered a signal, a hundred muskets crashed from the hedge at our right. The rope relaxed; I opened my eyes to see with astonishment the sheep rising on two legs and charging down upon us. The night was filled with shrill cries, with hideous yells. In the camp a drum was beating, and I could see the Blues running to arm themselves, dashing hither and thither in panic, their officers straining to bring order to the frenzied mob. But the savage flood was upon us . . .

"At least, aristocrat, you shall not escape!" hissed a voice in my ear; and the world reeled and turned black before me as a great blow fell upon my head.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"COURAGE!"

For a time I thought I was again in that rafted chamber at Beaufort which had been mine for so many years; but finally I recognized uneasily that this was not the bed to which I was accustomed, nor were these dark and grimy walls the ones at which I had been wont to stare while building my castles in Spain.

Then in a flash I remembered,—escape, flight, capture, rescue,—and I started to spring from the bed, but fell back again with a cry of pain. For an instant my head seemed splitting open, and I closed my eyes dizzily.

"Gently, monsieur, gently," said a voice; and I opened my eyes to see a kindly woman's face bending over me. "You must lie still," she added, and placed a cool hand upon my forehead. "You must go to sleep."

"But where am I?" I asked.

"You are with friends."

"And Mademoiselle de Chambray?"

"She also is safe."

I closed my eyes with a deep sigh of thankfulness. Safe, safe, safe—I repeated the word to myself again and again. Safe! Surely Providence had guarded us! Safe . . .

When I awoke the second time it was night, and

THE PATH OF HONOR

I lay for long staring up through the darkness and piecing together the adventures which had befallen me since that moment when Dubosq had halted me on the highway from Tours. My heart quickened as I recalled that evening in the garden, as I rebuilt it, as I lived it over again, second by second. Ah, that had been the one hour of my life! And yet, even in the shadow of the perils which followed, I had not been unhappy, for she had been beside me, with her clear eyes and smiling lips; and if she chose to smite me now and then, why certainly I had invited the blows and even, in a way, deserved them.

Then at the end I had won. That final disaster had driven her straight into my arms, as a storm drives the boats to harbor. She had laid her head upon my shoulder and whispered that she loved me! My pulses quickened at thought of it. She loved me—that superb, matchless woman loved me! What did all the rest matter—the world's opinion, my plighted word? I would take her—I would never give her up! She loved me! That should be my justification. And gripping that thought tight against my heart I dropped away to sleep.

The sun was shining brightly at the open window when I awakened for the third time, and again I saw that kindly face bending above me.

"You are better, monsieur?" she asked; and again her cool hand touched my forehead. "Yes—your fever is nearly gone."

"I am quite well," I assured her, "except for a

"COURAGE!"

little soreness of the head. Where are my clothes?"

"You will not need them for some days yet," she said, smiling at my eagerness.

"Nonsense!" I protested. "I must get up at once;" and I made a movement to throw back the covers, but she held my hands, and I found with surprise that she was stronger than I.

"You see," she added, still smiling, "you are weaker than you thought."

"But I cannot lie here," I cried half angrily. "I must get up. I have many things to do."

I shrank somehow from asking her outright where my love was waiting, why she did not come to me. Perhaps she was ill and could not come. That injury to the ankle . . .

"I must get up," I repeated doggedly; but again she held me back, her kindly eyes reading the trouble in my face.

"If you will lie still," she said, "I will bring you some one who will tell you all you wish to know—and whom, besides, I think you will be very glad to see."

"Thank you," I answered, my heart beating madly. "At once?"

She nodded, went to the door and spoke a word to some one in the room beyond.

Then my heart chilled, for it was not the dear face I had hoped to see which appeared in answer to the summons, but an ugly, bearded countenance, set on gigantic shoulders. And yet, at a second glance, I saw that the countenance, though ugly,

THE PATH OF HONOR

was not repulsive, that the eyes were kindly, and that the lips could smile winningly.

"M. de Tavernay," said my nurse, bringing him to my bedside, "this is M. de Marigny."

He bent and pressed one of my hands in his great palm, then sat down beside me, while I gazed with interest at perhaps the most famous among the leaders of the Bocage.

"And very pleased I am to find you doing so well, monsieur," he said in a voice singularly rich. "In faith, I thought for a time that we had rescued you from the rope merely to condemn you to the bludgeon."

"Even that would have been a service, monsieur," I answered, smiling in response to him. "But it seems I am to get well again."

"Yes; you had youth and health to fight for you. Alas, they are not always on one's side!"

"But the rescue, monsieur?" I asked. "How came it so pat to the moment?"

"I must confess that that was an accident," he laughed. "My spies brought me word that this regiment was marching to Thouars. I determined to strike one more blow before Easter, so I called my men together and we waited behind our hedges. When night fell we turned our sheepskins and, mingling with the flock upon the hillside, gradually descended upon our enemy's pickets. It was then that a sudden commotion in the camp below attracted our attention. We saw a fracas, from which emerged that little procession of which you were the central figure. We saw them prepare for the execution and supposing them to be about to

"COURAGE!"

hang some cut-throat of their own waited until they should accomplish it. Then suddenly you gave our battle-cry, 'God and the King!' and brought us headlong to your rescue. In fact I had not even to give the word to fire."

"It was fortunate I chose to make a theatric exit," I commented, laughing.

"Permit me to say that it was the act of a brave man, monsieur. I trust that I shall meet my end as bravely."

Poor, gallant gentleman! He met it more bravely still—the victim of treacherous envy, he faced the muskets erect, with eyes unbandaged, and himself gave the word to fire.

"Tell me more," I urged. "You won?"

"Oh, yes; we cut them to pieces and seized a store of arms and ammunition which will stand us in good stead. But we captured something else a thousand times more welcome."

"What was that, monsieur?" I asked.

"That was Citizen Goujon," he answered; and his eyes grew cold as steel. "We found him writhing in his tent——"

"Yes—I planted one good blow," I said, and told him the story. "What did you do with him?"

"We dragged him out, screaming with terror, begging for mercy, offering to divulge I know not what secrets, and hanged him with the rope which had been prepared for you. It was a pretty vengeance—even you could not desire a better."

"No," I murmured. "No."

His face softened into a smile.

THE PATH OF HONOR

"It has a resemblance to a certain Bible story, hasn't it?" he asked. "I did not then know the full tale of Goujon's iniquities, or I might have chosen a different death for him. It was Mademoiselle de Chambray who told me of the assault upon the château and the death of my dear friend, de Favras. Permit me to say that in that affair also, M. de Tavernay, you proved yourself a gallant man."

"Thank you, monsieur," I answered. "I but did what any gentleman would do. You found Mademoiselle de Chambray, then?"

I tried to ask it carelessly, but I fear my burning face betrayed me. At any rate, he smiled again as he looked at me.

"Yes," he said, "we found her lying senseless on the floor of Goujon's tent. At first we thought her dead, but she soon opened her eyes. Can you guess what her first word was? But perhaps I ought not to tell you!"

"Tell me," I murmured, striving to restrain the leaping of my heart.

"Well, you deserve some reward. Her first word was 'Tavernay!'"

"Yes," I said, my eyes suddenly misty; "she had just seen me dragged away to be hanged."

"And when we told her what had befallen you she ran to where you lay——"

"But her ankle," I broke in. "Did you know——"

"Yes, but she had forgotten it. She ran to where you lay; she washed and dressed your

"COURAGE!"

wound; she had you borne hither on a litter; and she remained beside you until yesterday—until, in a word, it was certain that you would recover."

"Then she has gone?" I asked. "She has gone?" and my heart seemed to stop in my bosom.

"Yes, she has gone."

"But her ankle?" I protested. "Oh, how she must have suffered!"

"She did not suffer at all," said Marigny. "When she at last had time to remember her injury she found that it no longer existed. She attributed its cure to you."

I lay a moment silent, striving to appear composed. She had gone—she had been brave enough to go; she had sought to spare me the agony of that farewell which must in any event be spoken. She had been wise perhaps. She knew my weakness; but I felt that I would give my whole life to see her again, to hold her hand, to look into her eyes, to hear her say once more, "I love you!"

"She left no word for me?" I asked at last.

"She left a note; but I am not to give it to you until you are ready to set out for Poitiers."

"For Poitiers?" I repeated, trembling. "Did she herself name Poitiers?"

"Most assuredly. And why do you grow so pale, my friend? Is it not near Poitiers that her home is?"

"Yes, monsieur," I groaned; "but my journey ends two leagues this side of Chambray. Those two leagues I shall never cover."

"What nonsense! Take my advice, the advice

THE PATH OF HONOR

of a man who knows more than you of women. Do not draw rein at Poitiers. Press on to the end of the journey. You will find a fair prize awaiting you."

I shook my head—he may have known other women, but not this one.

"Nevertheless I should like to have the note, M. de Marigny," I said. "It will comfort me somewhat. And besides, I am to start to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" he cried. "A week hence perhaps, if all goes well."

I smiled and continued to hold out my hand.

"Let me have the note, monsieur," I repeated.

He hesitated a moment, still looking at me, then went to the other room and brought the note back with him and placed it in my hands.

My fingers were trembling so I could scarcely break the seal; a mad hope possessed me that she had absolved me from my vow, that she summoned me to her. As I opened the paper a little heap of withered rose leaves fell upon my breast.

"Ah, you see!" cried Marigny. "I was right, then!"

I could not answer, but I held out the note for him to read. It contained but one word: "Courage!"

"Well," he said, "that is good advice. That is precisely what you need in this affair, M. de Tavernay."

"Yes," I agreed bitterly; "courage to give her up—courage never again to see her. You see she has gone!"

"COURAGE!"

"She could not very well remain," he said dryly, "after listening to you three days in your delirium!"

"My delirium?"

"Oh, I dare say she was not offended—what woman would have been?—but she was certainly red to the ears most of the time. Few maidens, I fancy, have been treated to such a continuous stretch of love-making."

I reddened, too, at thought of it.

"What she has suffered on my account!" I murmured.

"I tell you she did not suffer in the least," repeated Marigny. "You permitted her to see to the very bottom of your soul, and she saw no image there except her own!"

"She knew that from the first," I said sadly; "that does not alter matters. No; there is no way out, M. de Marigny. I can never hope to marry her—honor forbids it—an oath not to be broken. She herself has pointed that out to me in the clearest way. She has shown me what a coward I was when, for a moment, I permitted my love for her to blind me to my duty; and I know how she hates a coward. That is the real meaning of this message, monsieur; she is afraid even yet that I may not be brave enough."

Marigny had risen and stood looking down at me with a queer little smile upon his lips.

"Ah, M. de Tavernay," he said at last, "I understand now why that blow on the head failed to kill you."

With which cryptic utterance he left the room.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE PATH OF HONOR.

AT dawn two days later I took horse for Poitiers with clothes and equipage furnished me by M. de Marigny, who had been exceedingly kind to me from the first, though delighting to speak in riddles, from which he seemingly drew vast amusement. For myself, I was not in vein to be amused. I had fought my battle, and I had won it; I had set forward on the path of honor; but the victory had left a wound still raw and bleeding.

Yet such is the vanity of human nature that it was not without a certain pride in my achievement that I bade my host good-by and turned my horse's head toward the south. At least I need be ashamed to look no man or woman in the face. As for that scar in my heart, no eye except my own should ever contemplate it.

What a different creature this from that careless, heart-free boy who had pricked forth from Beaufort little more than a week before! Since then I had lived my whole life; I had sprung from youth to manhood; I had faced death, tasted of the world, gazed into a woman's eyes. I had taken blows and given them; I had walked in the black depths of despair, and stood transfigured on the uttermost peaks of joy. Love had touched me and left me changed. I had lived,—for a week I had lived,—nothing could take that from me!

THE PATH OF HONOR

After much thought I had formed my plan of action. It was quite possible, as Mlle. de Chambray had said, that Mlle. de Benseval desired me as little as I desired her. In case this were true,—and I flattered myself that it would require no great penetration on my part to discern it,—I would offer her her freedom. Should she refuse it, should she feel bound by our oath, as I did, I would marry her, then fling myself into the war in La Vendée, trusting that some kindly bullet would release us both from our unhappy fate. But if, on the contrary, she looked on me with favor, if I saw that I might win her heart, I would play a man's part and be as fond a lover as it is possible to be by taking thought.

So, having arrived at this conclusion, I put it behind me for the moment and pricked forward along the road more cheerfully than I had thought possible. Such is the virtue of facing one's duty squarely, of making up one's mind—even if it is only to accept manfully the worst that fate may offer.

My road at first lay through the narrow valleys and between the high hedges of the Bocage. Everywhere the peasants were working in their fields; their flocks were grazing peacefully in the pastures, and one would never have suspected that it was in this quiet country the first effective stand had been made against the bloody torrent of the Revolution. At last I passed Airvault and came out into the more level country of the Plain. I had planned to reach Neuville by noon, so pressed

THE PATH OF HONOR

on at a good pace, secure in the knowledge that here to the south I should encounter no Republican force and consequently no delay.

I reached Neuville in good season without adventure of any kind and asked to be directed to the Bon Vivant, an inn to which I had been recommended by M. de Marigny as the only decent one in the village. I found it without difficulty and sat down at a table on a little vine-clad terrace overlooking a pleasant valley. Here my lunch was presently brought to me, and here, soon after, the landlord sought me out and leaned deferentially above my chair.

"Is there anything more monsieur requires?" he asked.

"Nothing; I am thoroughly content," I answered. "I have to thank a friend for advising me to stop here."

"Have I the honor of addressing M. de Tavernay?" he questioned, bending still lower.

"That is indeed my name," I said, glancing up at him in surprise. "I did not know it had penetrated to these parts."

"Oh, monsieur is too modest!" he returned with a flattering smile. "There is a person here who wishes to speak with monsieur when he is at leisure."

"To speak with me?" I repeated, more and more astonished. "Who is it?"

"I do not know his name, but he is most anxious not to miss monsieur. He has been awaiting monsieur since yesterday."

THE PATH OF HONOR

The thought flashed through my mind that it was some emissary of the Republic sent to arrest me, but a moment's reflection showed me the absurdity of such a suspicion. How should the Republic know that I would pass this way, that I would stop at this inn? Besides, I was too small a bird to trouble the Republic—though, small as I was, I added to myself with a smile, the task of arresting me would scarcely have been entrusted to a single man. No; since he approached me alone in this manner he could not be an enemy. A sudden trembling seized me. Perhaps——

"Bring him here at once," I said; and my host, who had been patiently awaiting the end of my perplexity, bowed and hurried away.

He reappeared in a moment followed by a man dressed decently in black and showing all the marks of the servant. A glance at his face told me that I had never before seen him.

"This is M. de Tavernay," said my host to him; and bowing again to me, withdrew. Evidently I had become in his eyes a person of considerable importance.

"Well?" I asked, as calmly as I could, for my heart was throbbing wildly as I turned to the newcomer. "You wished to speak to me?"

"I have a letter for monsieur," he answered, and produced it from an inner pocket.

"A letter?" I repeated, and seized it with trembling hand. Then a sudden chill fell upon me as I saw the signature. The note ran:

THE PATH OF HONOR

"MY DEAR TAVERNAY:—

"My friend M. de Marigny, who seems to have fallen in love with you, has written me something of the adventures which have befallen you since you started on your journey to Poitiers. I need hardly tell you that I have awaited news from you with the greatest anxiety, and that I am overjoyed to know that you have come through so gallantly. I am sending a faithful man to meet you in order that he may bring you direct to me, for I am longing to clasp the son of my old friend in my arms. My daughter joins me in wishes for your speedy arrival.

"LOUIS MARIE DE BENSEVAL."

I read it through twice in order to give myself time to recover from the blow, especially from the poniard stroke of that final sentence.

"Very well," I said at last. "This was very thoughtful of your master. Have the horses got ready and I will join you in a moment."

He hastened away, and when, having finished my wine, I descended into the courtyard of the inn, I found him awaiting me with the horses accoutred for the journey. I swung into the saddle and cantered out from the inn, he following a pace behind.

But my serenity of the morning had vanished utterly. Now that I was face to face with the task which awaited me, now that there was no longer chance of evasion or escape, the blood turned to water in my veins. To make love to a woman I did not love, to appear before her always with a smile upon my lips and soft words upon my tongue, to play the gallant when my heart was

THE PATH OF HONOR

far away, to lead her to the church, to be bound to her irrevocably, and finally to pass the remainder of my life in her company, always with deceit in my face—in a word, to live a lie!—that was the task I had set myself. Would I be able to accomplish it? Was it not beyond my poor strength? After all, did honor demand of me such a sacrifice?

But I put that thought from me for the last time as I recalled certain scorching words which had been uttered to me on the road from Dairon. I must accomplish it, or prove myself unworthy of that temple in which she had enshrined me! I put my hand into my bosom and touched the note I carried there, repeating its one word over and over to myself:

“Courage! Courage! Courage!”

And in that moment my doubts fell away, never to return. I was armed, *cap-a-pie*, against whatever arrows fate might launch.

At last I turned and motioned my attendant to come forward.

“What is your name?” I asked, noting his intelligent face.

“Bertin, monsieur.”

“You left your master in good health, I trust?”

“In excellent health, monsieur.”

“And your mistress?”

“She also, monsieur. I have never seen her looking better.”

“Let me see,” I went on, “Madame de Benseval is dead, is she not?”

THE PATH OF HONOR

"Oh, these many years, monsieur."

"There was only one child?"

"Only one, monsieur."

"How old is she?"

"Nineteen, monsieur."

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask him if she was beautiful, but I choked the question back. It was indiscreet—and after all what did it matter?

"They have been greatly worried at monsieur's failure to appear," he added.

I almost groaned aloud.

"M. de Benseval said he had been expecting me," I murmured mechanically.

"Oh, yes; for a week almost. He had made arrangements for the fête, but of course it was postponed when monsieur did not arrive."

"Postponed until when, Bertin?" I questioned.

"It is to take place to-morrow if monsieur approves," he answered, and glanced at me quickly.

This time I could not wholly suppress the groan, but managed to change it into a cough. The end was nearer than I had thought.

We rode on in silence after that, for I had no more questions to ask, nor apparently had Bertin any information to volunteer. And at last, just as dusk was falling, we trotted around a turn in the road and saw before us the walls and towers of Poitiers rising tier upon tier to the cathedral which crowns the summit of the hill upon which the town is built. It looked warm and gay in the rays of the setting sun, but darkness had fallen ere

THE PATH OF HONOR

we crossed the bridge which leads into the town; and once engulfed in its narrow, steep, and tortuous streets, I had soon lost all sense of direction, and appreciated more than ever M. de Benseval's thoughtfulness in sending me a guide.

For my companion seemed to know the road perfectly, turned this way and that without hesitation, and at last drew rein before a house at whose door a torch was flaring.

"Here we are," he said, as he threw himself from the saddle and helped me to dismount. "This way, monsieur."

Scarcely had we set foot on the lowest step when the door burst open and a man appeared on the threshold—a man tall, of commanding presence, with the noblest countenance I had ever seen.

"Tavernay!" he cried, his arms extended. "Tavernay!"

And I, as though I had found a second father, sprang up the steps and threw myself into them.

I know not how it was, but at the end of a moment I was telling myself that it was worth some sacrifice to be near a man like this. He led me in across the vestibule to the drawing-room beyond and sat me down and looked at me.

"You are your father over again, my boy," he said at last; and his face was very tender. "I see already that I am going to love you!"

I could find no word of answer, but I think he read my heart in my face for he held out his hand and gripped mine.

"And now," he continued, "before you meet

THE PATH OF HONOR

my daughter I desire to talk frankly with you for a moment. I have sometimes wondered if your father and I were wise to bind you when you were only a child. After all, a man should choose for himself, for marriage without love is not marriage, and good or bad, there is no escape once the vows are taken. I know the Paris fashion; I know that there are many fathers who do not believe as I do; they think me a fool—which is not so harsh a name as I sometimes apply to them. Your father was the dearest friend I ever had. I certainly do not intend to make his son unhappy.”

“Monsieur,” I said, “I am already betrothed to your daughter. If she does not love another——”

“No,” he said quickly, “I can answer for that.”

“Then, monsieur, I am ready to espouse her, and I will do my best to make her happy.”

He gripped my hand again, his eyes very bright.

“I am sure of it,” he said; “but it is not a question of her happiness, but of yours. That she will find you a good and tender husband I do not doubt; but there are some things which you should know. She has had no mother for many years, and I have perhaps been too occupied in my own affairs to give her the attention she required. She has to a certain extent gone her own way, and such training as I have given her has, I fear, been a man’s training rather than a woman’s. So she grew up somewhat wild and headstrong, with strange ideas upon many subjects; though I did not suspect this until a month ago when I bade her

THE PATH OF HONOR

prepare her trousseau. It was at that time she gave evidence of a disposition wholly new to me. In a word, she begged me that she might not be compelled to marry, and when I reminded her that my honor was engaged she retorted that her happiness weighed more heavily with her than my honor, and that at least she reserved the right to see you before consenting."

"Oh, monsieur," I broke in, "say no more. I have no wish to force her to become my wife."

He held up his hand to stop me.

"Understand," he said, his eyes on mine, "that I did not agree with her. With women it is not the same as men. Any man who is affectionate and faithful can win a woman's love, and keep it. She has not a man's distractions, temptations, opportunities. I am very sure that you will make my daughter love you."

"God grant it," I said, my lips quivering. "It is my wish to make her happy. But I am not a brilliant match—not so brilliant as she deserves. You are aware that this Revolution has ruined us."

Again he held up his hand.

"No more of that, M. de Tavernay. By the way, you have not yet asked me what her dowry is to be."

"No," I answered; "I had not thought of it."

He smiled queerly.

"Well, we can settle all that to-morrow," he said. "My chief concern is for your happiness. Tell me frankly, my friend, do you desire this marriage?"

THE PATH OF HONOR

"A man is bound by his oath, monsieur," I answered, trembling a little, but meeting without flinching the searching gaze he bent upon me. "Courage! Courage!" my heart repeated.

"I press this point," he added, "even perhaps to indiscretion, because M. de Marigny dropped what I fancied was a hint that you had formed another attachment."

I put the past behind me and faced the future squarely. The moment had come to lie, and I met it as bravely as I could.

"M. de Marigny was mistaken," I said steadily. "Be assured that if your daughter does me the honor to accept my hand she will find that my heart goes with it."

He sprang to his feet and gripped both my hands in his.

"Spoken like a man!" he cried, his eyes shining strangely. "I feel that I have found a son—I give you my daughter gladly. Come," he added, "she awaits you;" and he opened a door and motioned me to precede him.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE GUERDON.

FOR a moment I did not see her; then I caught the shimmer of her gown from the embrasure of a window, where she stood staring absently down into the street below, and there floated to me a faint perfume which shook me with the agony of recollection. I turned blindly, expecting her father to announce me, but found with astonishment that he had closed the door and left me alone with her. A terrible shyness and indecision seized me. To advance to her boldly, to take her hand—that was the lover's part, and yet I felt myself utterly unable to fulfil it. Ah, what a horrible chance that she, too, should use that perfume! I had not reckoned upon that!

“Courage! Courage! Courage!” I repeated to myself, and touched the note warm against my heart; but in this supreme crisis, its power failed me.

So I stood where I was, the cold sweat upon my brow, looking foolish enough, as I have since been told, and waited for her to turn and discover me. That she did not turn surprised me more and more, for surely she must have heard the opening and closing of the door. Then, as I saw her more clearly, I perceived that she, too, was agitated, for she carried her handkerchief to her lips once or twice with a hand anything but steady.

THE PATH OF HONOR

Whatever my cowardice, I could not permit her to suffer because of it, so I gripped my courage to me and advanced to her side.

"Mademoiselle," I began stammeringly.

She turned suddenly and faced me—and I stood struck to stone, staring, not able to believe my eyes; for it was she—my love—Charlotte!

"You!" I said hoarsely at last. "You!"

The blood was coming and going in her cheeks; her eyes were luminous with a strange fire. She held out a trembling hand to me, and when I kissed it I found it cold as ice.

"Did you think it very heartless of me to desert you, M. de Tavernay?" she questioned.

"At first I could scarcely believe it," I stammered, still staring at her; "but afterwards I saw that you meant to be kind. I should not have won the battle if you had stayed."

"And you did win it!" she cried.

"Yes; your note helped—and—and the rose-leaves," I added hoarsely.

"I found them—in your bosom," she said, her color deepening. "I thought—perhaps—you would like to have them."

"Yes," I said; "yes;" then stopped, looking at her. "But one may lose a battle even after winning it," I warned her. "I fear I am losing mine. You are trusting me too far, as you did once before. Do you remember?" and my blood glowed at the recollection.

"Don't!" she said, and turned away.

"Where is——"

THE GUERDON

I hesitated, looking about me. I could not say the words.

"Your betrothed?" she finished, turning back, her eyes gleaming in the old manner. "You are longing for her, then?"

"Without a rock to tie to," I said as calmly as I could, "I shall be swept away in another moment, beyond hope of rescue. I have never seen you so beautiful. I have never loved you——"

She stopped me with a gesture.

"M. de Tavernay," she said with impressive gravity, "it is my painful duty to tell you that Mlle. de Benseval no longer exists."

"She is dead!" I murmured dazedly.

"Oh, not in the least. She was never more thoroughly alive than at this moment."

"Then she is married!" I cried, a great load lifting from my heart. "I see it all—she *did* love another—she has married him."

"Wrong again, monsieur. She is still a maiden and does not love another."

"Come!" I said. "You are playing with me. I warn you, it is dangerous!" and I gripped my arms behind me to keep them from about her.

She noticed the movement and retreated a step.

"Monsieur," she said, "I will tell you the story—if you will promise to remain where you are until I have finished."

"And after you have finished?"

"Oh—then—you may do as you please."

"I promise!" I cried, the blood bounding madly through my veins.

THE PATH OF HONOR

"It seems that your betrothed is a wilful and headstrong creature," she began, "and when the time came to prepare to marry you she rebelled. She had been permitted to form ideas of her own. She refused to give herself to a man she had never seen, or whom she remembered only as a thin and unattractive boy. So the day before you were to arrive, having failed to exact from her father the promise that the right of choice should be left to her——"

"Yes, he told me," I interrupted.

"But he did not tell you that she fled?"

"Fled!" I repeated. "Then that is the reason she is not here."

"I am sure she would never have done it," my companion continued; "however irregular her training—would never perhaps have thought of a step so desperate, but for a book she happened to find one day in her father's library. She was attracted first by the illustrations, which were by Gravelot and very beautiful; then she became absorbed in the story, a translation from the English, which related the adventures of a young lady who ran away from her father to avoid a marriage into which he would have forced her.* The results of this flight proved so fortunate,—for by it she won the man she really loved,—that Mlle. de Benseval resolved to emulate it. So she mounted her horse one morning and instead of taking her usual ride, dismissed her groom and spurred away

* See note page 236.

THE GUERDON

to the house of a friend who, she knew, would sympathize with her and perhaps intercede with her father."

"Oh, it was with him she was in love!" I murmured.

"Not in the least, monsieur; she was in love with no one, and this friend was a woman. But that very evening, strangely enough, she met some one whom she fancied she might love; and in the days that followed, when they were much together, she was drawn very near to him; for she saw that he loved her truly. And at last, in a moment of trial when he held her in his arms, she confessed that she loved him in return."

"Well," I said with a sigh of relief, "it appears to me then that I need think no more of Mlle. de Benseval. Let us dismiss her—there is another topic——"

"Wait," she said; "I fear you will find yourself thinking a great deal about her before long. For after that one moment of utter joy she drew away from her lover, held him at a distance, was unkind to him, although all the while she was longing to throw herself on his bosom and draw his arms close about her!"

"What!" I said incredulously. "She did that? Was she mad, then?"

"No; she was a woman, and she played with him because that is woman's nature."

"Yet she knew he loved her!"

"Yes," she answered, her eyes glowing more and more. "She knew he loved her, deeply and

THE PATH OF HONOR

purely, as she could never hope to be loved again; but she resolved to put him to one supreme test. If he stood the test she would adore him, worship him, she would be his, body and soul, through all eternity. If he did not stand it—well, she would still love him!”

“And did he stand it?” I asked, moved more and more by this story, to which at first I had listened but indifferently.

“Let me finish, and you will see. She returned to her home, she opened her heart to her father, who is really the kindest and noblest of men, and he agreed to assist her in the test. So to-day—this evening——”

She faltered, stopped and looked at me, smiling tremulously, her cheeks flooded suddenly with color.

“Yes,” I cried; “this evening——”

“Oh, it is more difficult than I had thought! How shall I go on? Three months ago, monsieur, there was a death in our family.”

“Yes?” I asked, failing to see what this had to do with the story.

“It was that of my father’s elder brother,” she continued unsteadily, without looking at me, “so that my father, who up to that time had been M. de Benseval, succeeded to the title and became—became——”

“M. de Chambray!” I shouted, seeing it all as in a lightning flash; and I sprang toward her, blind with sudden joy.

For an instant she tried to hold me off; but my

THE GUERDON

arms were about her, straining her to me. Then suddenly she yielded, and nestled to me, close—close against my heart.

“Oh, my love!—my love!—my love!” she cried, and raised her lips to mine.

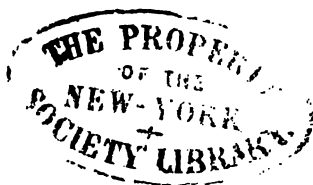
“Did you call, M. de Tavernay?” asked a voice; and I raised my head to see my father’s friend standing upon the threshold, looking at us with smiling face.

“Yes, monsieur,” I answered as intelligibly as I could. “I desired to announce to you that your daughter has decided to marry me.”

“In faith,” he said, a humorous light in his eye, “I somehow suspected it the moment I opened the door.”

With which remark he closed it again, and left us alone together.

THE END.



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